



Staging Jewish Modernism: The Vilna Troupe and the Rise of a Transnational Yiddish Art Theater Movement

Citation

Caplan, Debra Leah. 2013. Staging Jewish Modernism: The Vilna Troupe and the Rise of a Transnational Yiddish Art Theater Movement. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University.

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**Staging Jewish Modernism:
The Vilna Troupe and the Rise of a Transnational Yiddish Art Theater Movement**

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations

Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

April 2013

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is the first study of the avant-garde Yiddish art theater movement, which flourished across five continents during the interwar period. From Warsaw to San Francisco, Buenos Aires to Winnipeg, Mexico City to Paris, and Johannesburg to Melbourne, the Yiddish art theaters were acclaimed by critics and popular with Jewish and non-Jewish spectators alike. These theaters had a significant impact on renowned theater practitioners around the world, who credited the Yiddish art theaters with inspiring their own artistic practice. In tracing how a small group of Yiddish theater artists developed a modernist theater movement with a global impact, my project provides a key and heretofore missing chapter in the history of the modern stage.

I argue that the spirit of innovation that characterized the activities of the Yiddish art theaters and enabled them to become so influential was a direct product of the transnational nature of their movement. Operating in a Jewish cultural context unbounded by national borders, the success of these companies was propelled by a steady exchange of actors, directors, scenic designers, and critics across the world. Buoyed by a global audience base and unconfined by the geographical-linguistic borders that limited the national theaters of their neighbors, Yiddish theater artists were uniquely able to develop a fully transnational modernist theater practice.

The global reach of the Yiddish art theaters is best exemplified by the Vilna Troupe (1915-1935), the catalyst for this movement and the primary focus of my study. The Vilna Troupe was the epicenter of the international Yiddish art theater movement throughout the interwar period. I demonstrate how the Troupe remained itinerant throughout its history,

enabling it to reach an ever-larger global audience and inspiring dozens of other Jewish actors to create Yiddish art theaters of their own. Where previous generations of Yiddish actors had been subject to the double disapproval of Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals alike, the Vilna Troupe legitimized the Yiddish art theater movement as a key contributor to the global theatrical avant-garde.

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Acknowledgments

This project was the work of my hands. First and foremost, I am grateful to my dissertation committee, Ruth R. Wisse, Martin Puchner, and Joel Berkowitz, who were endlessly enthusiastic about this project and always managed to provide precisely the feedback I needed to hear most. I remain astounded by their collective knowledge and wisdom, and consider myself lucky to have been their student. I could not have asked for a better committee.

Several institutions provided research support at critical junctures. The preparation of this manuscript was made possible by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research's Maria Salit-Gitelson Tell Fellowship; the Harvard University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences' Merit Fellowship; Targum Shlishi, a Raquel and Aryeh Rubin Foundation; and the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture. Harvard's Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies provided research support and an office during the early stages of this project, and the Posen Foundation supplied a generous grant that enabled me to attend the Posen Seminar in Secular Jewish Literature. Finally and crucially, the Foundation for Jewish Culture's Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Dissertation Completion Fellowship and the Raphael and Deborah Melamed Fellowship at Harvard's Center for Jewish Studies enabled me to devote a full year solely to this manuscript. At YIVO, Dr. Paul (Hershl) Glasser provided invaluable feedback on my work in progress, Jesse Cohen patiently guided me through hundreds of Vilna Troupe photographs, Gunnar Berg and Fruma Mohrer helped me find rare Vilna Troupe treasures not listed in any finding aid, and Nadia Kahn made sure that I never got lost. James P. Rosenbloom helped me find rare periodicals in the Brandeis Judaica collection. I owe special thanks to Dr. Charles Berlin, Elizabeth Vernon, and Vardit Samuels at the Harvard College Library's Judaica Division for their gracious assistance in facilitating my access to the collections and their good humor in

granting me de facto office space for several months while I combed through the entirety of the Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Collection.

My “cohort” at Harvard provided me with that rarest of occurrences: a local *kehile* of Yiddish scholars. Special thanks to Eitan Kensky, Sunny Yudkoff, and Ofer Dynes for inviting me to present work in progress at Harvard’s Modern Jewish Worlds Workshop, and to Jessica Fechter, Mihaly Kalman, Yuri Vendenyapin, and Sasha Senderovich for making Harvard my Yiddish home. Elsewhere in Cambridge, Ingrid Anderson patiently listened to me talk through the project chapter by chapter, and taught me that it was possible to be a scholar and a mother at the same time. Away from Harvard, I was fortunate to find a vibrant transnational Yiddish intellectual community of my own. Thanks to Sonia Gollance, Sebastian and Asya Schulman, Anna Torres, Zohar Weimar-Kellman, Avia Moore, Shane Smulyan, Mandy Cohen, Jordan Finkin, and Agi Legutko for advice along the way.

Though I did not know it at the time, the seeds of this project were planted on my first visit to Vilna under the auspices of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute. There I was privileged to study under Yitskhok Niborski, Avrom Lichtenboym, Pesakh Fishman (פֿישמאַן), and Fania Bransovsky, who schooled me in Litvak dialect and taught me to fall in love with Vilna, that *shtot fun gayst un tmimes*. I have thought of them often while writing this dissertation.

My experience at the Mellon School of Theater and Performance Research was instrumental in shaping my scholarly voice. For this, I am grateful to Martin Puchner for bringing me on board as Executive Director and giving me the professional opportunity of a lifetime. Matthew Wilson Smith’s and Bernadette Meyler’s Mellon seminars helped shape my thinking on the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the politics of the stage, respectively. Katherine Biers and the participants in the 2011 Mellon dissertation workshop provided valuable feedback on an

early draft of Chapter 1. Rebecca Kastleman deserves special thanks for providing crucial feedback on Chapter 3, for keeping the Mellon School afloat, and for her friendship.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to present portions of this dissertation in progress at a variety of conferences, workshops, and invited lectures at the American Society for Theatre Research, the Association for Jewish Studies, the Modern Language Association, the American Comparative Literature Association, Harvard University, the University of Maryland, Simmons College, the Posen Seminar in Jewish Literature, the Boston Workmen's Circle, the Montreal International Yiddish Theater Festival, and Target Margin Theater Company. I'd like to especially thank Christopher Balme, Zachary Baker, Edna Nahshon, Ron Robboy, Rachel Rubinstein, Naomi Seidman, and Michael Steinlauf for their feedback on these presentations.

Julie Stone Peters and Alyssa Quint provided valuable suggestions on my dissertation prospectus that guided the shape of this project. Joanna Nizynska's mentorship was crucial as I wrote my prospectus. Magda Romanska mentored me through the writing of this project and was always available for advice. Laurence Senelick encouraged me to pursue this project and shared his personal collection of Vilna Troupe photographs. I am also grateful to the members of the Jewish theater working group at Harvard for their encouragement of this project: Stacy Wolf, Stuart Hecht, Judah Cohen, and Max Shulman.

Several descendents and friends of the *Vilner* reached out and gave me access to their photographs, recordings, ephemera, and family lore. Dan Ben-Amos introduced me to his great uncle Noah Nachbush over tea. Sharon Asro and Alexander Zaloum told stories that brought their grandparents and great-grandparents Alexander Azro and Sonia Alomis to life. Leonard Fein reminisced about Nachbush as a family friend and provided me with rare recordings of

monologues from *The Dybbuk*. Helen Deborah Lewis shared stories about her great-great uncle, Maurice Schwartz.

Two research assistants, Ioana Costache in Bucharest and Zosia Sochanska in Warsaw, scoured the collections of the Romanian Academy Library and the Biblioteka Narodowa respectively for material and translated dozens of articles. Christopher M. Peterson provided additional Polish translation support. Dorine Oz and Lena Vanelslender in Amsterdam contributed translations of Dutch reviews. William Boletta pieced together and translated several nearly indecipherable German reviews in Fraktur with missing fragments.

Special thanks are due to the friends and family members who provided me with the best support network any scholar could desire. Shauna Gordon-McKeon provided writing motivation when I needed it most, and Coriana Hunt Swartz, Valerie Howlett, Erik Benau, and Mira Whiting kept me sane throughout this long process. My mother reminded me why I started this project in the first place. My sister, Becky Caplan, was always there no matter what.

I could never have completed this project without the support of my wonderful husband Nick Taft, who never once questioned my desire to “have it all.” I cannot thank him enough for always believing in the value of my work. To my beautiful children Zev and Maya, my *yinglele* and my *meydele* who came into the world alongside this project, it is you who make me who I am. This book is as much yours as it is mine.

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my father Ze’ev Caplan (1949 – 2003). It is to him that I owe my first introduction to the Yiddish stage, and it seems fitting to mark his tenth *yortsayt* with the completion of this manuscript. May his memory be for a blessing.

Debra Caplan
Cambridge, Massachusetts
Erev Pesakh, March 2013

Note On Transliteration

The majority of Yiddish words and names have been transliterated according to the system established by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

<i>ay</i>	‘i’ as in ‘wide’
<i>e</i>	‘e’ as in ‘bed’
<i>ey</i>	‘a’ as in ‘gate’
<i>i</i>	‘i’ as in ‘sit’
<i>oy</i>	‘oy’ as in ‘boy’
<i>u</i>	‘oo’ as in ‘book’
<i>dzh</i>	‘j’ as in ‘judge’
<i>kh</i>	‘ch’ as in ‘chutzpah’
<i>tsh</i>	‘ch’ as ‘cheer’
<i>zh</i>	‘s’ as in ‘measure’

However, I have made exceptions for those actors and writers who became known under non-standard transliterations of their names, including Peretz Hirschbein, Mordechai Mazo, Leib Kadison, Chaim Shniur, Bella Bellarina, Maurice Schwartz, Noah Nachbush, and Jacob Waislitz.

PROLOGUE

The Sun Never Sets on the Yiddish Stage

Consider an unlikely scenario. In the midst of World War I, a motley group of Jewish refugees in their teens and early twenties becomes obsessed with the idea of creating a “Yiddish art theater” modeled upon Stanislavsky’s famous Russian company. By day they work as laborers, storekeepers, housepainters, and wartime smugglers; by night they teach themselves the basics of acting and stagecraft from outdated Russian and German books. Elocution presents a particular challenge: those who do know Yiddish speak in a variety of regional dialects, while others do not speak the language at all and must learn it from scratch. The only theater in which they can afford to perform is a dilapidated former circus building on the outskirts of town, recently repurposed by the army as a military stable. The roof leaks; the stage reeks of horse hung. It is a bitterly cold winter and there is no money for heat, so the actors rehearse with frozen limbs and thaw their stage makeup over the footlights. Most eat one meal per day – a single boiled potato – and rehearsals are frequently interrupted when actors faint from hunger.

Within a few months, however, these same actors are performing in the most extravagant theater in their city, in a building that has never before permitted Jews *or* Yiddish upon its stage. Within a year, they are the most famous Jewish theater company in Eastern Europe and their productions are frequently reviewed by the Polish, Russian, and German press. In five years, they have become a global sensation, drawing the attention of prominent Jewish and non-Jewish actors, artists, writers, political leaders, and intellectuals from across Eastern and Western Europe, North and South America, and beyond. The list of those who sing their praises includes

Max Reinhardt, Harold Clurman, David Belasco, Sarah Bernhardt, Eugene Ionesco, Albert Einstein, and several heads of state. They are widely regarded as one of the foremost modernist theater companies in the world.

This was the improbable rise of the Vilna Troupe, a “Yiddish art theater” that emerged in 1915 to become an international sensation between the two World Wars.¹ The amateur actors who founded the Vilna Troupe were unlikely candidates to spark a global theater movement. They were wartime refugees who only came together in Vilna after a Russian military decree forced them to evacuate the cities where their families had resided for generations. Most were scarcely out of their teens with little formal acting experience or theatrical training. Still, these actors had a compelling vision for a theater that would bring a series of sweeping innovations to the Yiddish stage: the ensemble acting style that they had observed in the productions of the Moscow Art Theater; a globally-sourced repertoire of the highest literary quality; an insistence upon using only the Yiddish dialect most associated with highbrow Jewish culture; and stage direction that drew inspiration from the most current international avant-garde trends.² Spurred by these innovations, the Vilna Troupe became a global sensation as it toured on a nearly constant basis over the next two decades: first to other modest cities and towns in Poland, then to the unofficial capital of Yiddish culture in Warsaw, and subsequently to Austria, Romania, Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, England, Canada, and throughout the United States, traveling in complex patterns of multidirectional migration across countries and continents, while

¹ For the purposes of this dissertation, I will use the singular “Vilna Troupe” to refer inclusively to the proliferation of companies operating under the *Vilner trupe* name during the interwar period. These troupes were part of a single cultural phenomenon, sharing not only artistic and stylistic goals, but also repertoire, actors, and directors. It was not uncommon for an actor to perform variously in rival Vilna Troupes over the course of his or her career.

² In a 1924 interview with a *Morgn Zhurnal* reporter, Alexander Azro recalled that the Troupe had chosen the Litvak dialect *precisely* because they wanted to break with the Yiddish theater of the past. The *Voliner* dialect, Azro explained, was the foundation of the old Yiddish theater, and thus had to be abolished to pave the way for a new Yiddish stage. Alef Alef, “Dos naye in der Vilner trupe,” *Morgn zhurnal*, 18 January 1924, 6.

individual Vilna Troupe-affiliated actors simultaneously performed material from the company's distinctive repertoire in Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Australia, and New Zealand. Buoyed by a global audience base and unconfined by the kinds of geographical-linguistic boundaries that limited the national theaters of their neighbors, these Yiddish theater artists were uniquely able to develop a *transnational* modernist theater movement.

Yiddish – the primary vernacular of Eastern European Jewry – had always held a particularly low status within the multilingual hierarchy of Ashkenazic Jewish culture. Hebrew was the holy language of the Torah; Aramaic was the heightened language of the Talmud and rabbinic law; but Yiddish was the lowbrow language of the masses.³ Accordingly, Jewish intellectuals likewise regarded the first generation of professional Yiddish theaters that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century as unworthy of serious attention. But in a sudden reversal, the performers who made up the Vilna Troupe succeeded in earning the devotion not only of their Yiddish-speaking brethren but also of a remarkably diverse global audience that cut across religious, linguistic, and national divides with unexpected ease.

It was through the productions of the Vilna Troupe that hundreds of thousands of theatergoers around the world first encountered the Yiddish stage; and by and large, audiences were enthralled. In Paris, a seriously ill Sarah Bernhardt defied her doctor's order of strict bed rest and insisted on being carried into the theater on a litter so she could see the Vilna Troupe perform before she died. In Bucharest, a young Eugene Ionesco faithfully attended every performance of the visiting Yiddish artists; decades later, he would credit the Vilna Troupe's

³ The seminal Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich grouped Hebrew and Aramaic together as a single Jewish language: "*loshn-koydesh*" ("the holy tongue"). According to Weinreich, Ashkenazic Jewish life was structured around a rigid yet symbiotic system of internal bilingualism (*loshn-koydesh*/Yiddish), or in some cases, trilingualism (*loshn-koydesh* for prayer and study, Yiddish for basic communication, and Russian, German, or Polish for highbrow cultural activity. See Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, trans. Shlomo Noble (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), vol. 1, 247-314 and A285-6, note 4.18. On Hebrew-Yiddish bilingualism as a "sexual-linguistic system" reflecting gendered perceptions of both languages, see Naomi Seidman's excellent *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

modernist aesthetic with inspiring his career as an Absurdist playwright.⁴ In Belgium, the monarchy refused to allow the Vilna Troupe to pay to rent Antwerp's finest theater and insisted on personally subsidizing the company's production expenses, citing an obscure provision in the Belgian royal charter that "true art" ought to be shown for free. In London, every theater in the city shut down for the Vilna Troupe's opening night so that their actors could attend and learn from the visiting Yiddish players who had attracted worldwide attention and acclaim. These responses are all the more surprising when we recall that the Vilna Troupe was performing exclusively *in Yiddish*, a Jewish language with historic low-culture associations that a large percentage of their audience typically did not speak or understand.

These were unexpected triumphs of an extraordinary magnitude for a Yiddish theater company. So why did this unlikely experiment succeed? How can we account for the improbable metamorphosis of the Vilna Troupe from an obscure group of amateur refugee actors to a central fixture of the international modernist theater scene?

My contention is that the Vilna Troupe's rise to prominence was enabled by an astonishing degree of cross-fertilization among Jewish theater artists across geographical borders. Traversing countries and even continents as a matter of course, the members of the Vilna Troupe encountered new techniques, repertoire, and aesthetic trends from other theater artists around the world, and then adopted these globally sourced models into their own productions. This rich transnational exchange of theatrical ideas was, in turn, a byproduct of the Eastern European Jewish experience during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which persecution, political instability, and economic insecurity compelled millions of Jews to migrate across vast distances. These large-scale migrations led to the creation of specific

⁴ Joseph Buloff, "How the Yiddish Theatre Invented Theatre of the Absurd," Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Collection, Papers 5, Folder BG22. Harvard Library Judaica Division, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

pathways for transnational cultural circulation among an interconnected network of Yiddish-speaking communities around the globe. The development of a thriving cross-continental Yiddish press, for example, laid the groundwork for the emergence of a company like the Vilna Troupe by creating a Yiddish-speaking audience base that was both globally dispersed and in constant communication.

Yiddish theater had always relied heavily upon traveling companies, but it was only with the establishment of the Vilna Troupe, which attracted large numbers of non-Jewish spectators to the Yiddish theater for the first time, that Yiddish theater first entered into conversation with the modern theater at large. The Vilna Troupe's success in this regard can be credited to the company's uniquely transnational orientation, which manifested itself in two ways. First, the Vilna Troupe traveled *constantly* over the course of the company's nearly twenty year tenure, exporting its distinct artistic ideology, aesthetic sensibility, and repertoire across five continents via vast networks of itinerant affiliated actors and subsidiary companies. Even the company's iconic name, which on the surface seemed to connect the Troupe to a single fixed location, was a misnomer. The Vilna Troupe left Vilna for good scarcely two years after its founding. Over the next eighteen years, no Vilna Troupe company would ever again remain in one place for more than a few months at a time. With Yiddish speakers increasingly scattered around the world, and without access to government subventions, established dramatic academies, purpose-built performance facilities, or any of the other institutions or benefits that nationally based theaters tend to have at their disposal, constant travel was virtually the only way for a Yiddish theater company with high artistic standards to survive. The Vilna Troupe thus did not "go on tour" in any traditional sense; rather, we might say that the Vilna Troupe was *always* on tour. There was rarely a stable home base to which the actors could return after their travels, rarely a theater

building, town, city, or even country that “belonged” to the Vilna Troupe in the sense that Moscow “belonged” to the Moscow Art Theater. Instead, the Vilna Troupe was a Jewish theater company that operated at the interstices between nations and belonged equally to the Polish theater, German theater, Romanian theater, British theater, Belgian Theater, French theater, American theater, and dozens of other traditions. The company was thus not merely a *non-national* theater in a culture without a nation, but also, an *acutely* transnational enterprise. Constant and multidirectional migrancy was an inextricable part of what it meant to be a member of the Vilna Troupe.

Or rather, we might say more precisely: the Vilna *Troupes*. Beginning with the first of many quarrels between Vilna Troupe actors in 1918 (sparked in this case by a convoluted love triangle and a surprise elopement), there were always several Vilna Troupe companies operating simultaneously in multiple locales. This multiplicity of Vilna Troupes was further complicated by the fact that actors frequently shifted their allegiances between different incarnations of the company. Over the course of twenty years, nearly two hundred individual actors thus performed under the mantle of we might better call “the Vilna Troupe phenomenon.” Not only did each individual Vilna Troupe travel more frequently and extensively than other companies of the period, but the existence of *multiple* Vilna Troupes created an internationally recognizable brand almost overnight. And with each Vilna Troupe touring an average of sixty cities a year, it often seemed to theatergoers that the company was everywhere at once. As Vilna Troupe actor Joseph Buloff quipped, “They used to refer to the Yiddish theater as to the British Empire where the sun never sets. When the curtain falls in Britain, the curtain rises in N.[ew] York.”⁵

⁵ Notes for Buloff’s untitled keynote speech at an unidentified 1979 Jewish culture festival. Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Collection, Papers 4, Folder BG31, Harvard Judaica Division.

Second, the Vilna Troupe fully embraced its precarious position as an itinerant theater company as its primary source for theatrical innovation. In other words, these actors re-envisioned what had historically been regarded as the Yiddish theater's greatest handicap – its perpetual itinerancy – as an artistic advantage. Inspired by the Vilna Troupe, the interwar Yiddish theater became known as much for its artistic inventiveness as for its global scope – and indeed, these two characteristics were inextricably linked. The actors quickly realized that if they wanted their highbrow Yiddish theater to survive, their productions would have to appeal to a far more diverse audience than any that had ever attended the Yiddish theater. The Vilna Troupe thus designed all of its productions with non-Yiddish-speaking Gentile intellectuals firmly in mind. More than half of the company's repertoire was drawn from non-Jewish playwrights in the Vilna Troupe's own Yiddish translations; likewise, its productions drew aesthetic inspiration from other theater companies that Vilna Troupe members encountered as they traveled. Taken together, these strategies enabled the Vilna Troupe to attract uncommonly diverse audiences. Any spectator, Jewish or not, could almost always find a familiar touchstone in these productions: a stylistic touch, a design sensibility, a playwright, a staging choice. It was thus not unusual for a Vilna Troupe audience to include ordinary Yiddish-speaking Jews sitting side-by-side with prominent non-Jewish intellectuals, military personnel, politicians, scholars, and theater artists. Supported by a transnational Yiddish-speaking base and fueled by a globally sourced aesthetic sensibility that attracted new audiences to the Yiddish stage, the Vilna Troupe was ideally positioned to develop an international reputation for modernist theatrical innovation. Individually, the actors may have longed for a permanent home; but collectively, the Vilna Troupe was able to create innovative theater art precisely because of its perpetual homelessness.

The turn to the *transnational* – that is to say, phenomena that operate across national borders – has invigorated theater studies in recent years. As Christopher Balme and others have argued, one of the defining characteristics of modern theater was its routine export across national borders, which made the stage a site of rich cross-cultural interaction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁶ However, Jewish theater has never been explored in relation to this emerging discourse. And yet, we might call the Jews of Eastern Europe the archetypal migrants of the modern period. As historian Rebecca Kobrin has argued, “transnationalism is nothing new” within the context of modern Jewish culture, which was dominated by large-scale forced and voluntary migrations.⁷

Most studies of traveling theater companies must still contend with the dynamics of the particularly national/linguistic context from which its actors originated. But the Vilna Troupe *explodes* the very notion of transnational theater by on the one hand *removing* the national element altogether, and on the other, multiplying the significance of the national exponentially – for the Vilna Troupe was simultaneously fully invested in cosmopolitanism and thoroughly committed to serving the national ambitions of the Jewish people. This dissertation thus poses a particular set of challenges that have not been not yet been robustly addressed by the emerging discourse around global theater history. What does “national theater” mean in a transnational context? What role do state artistic institutions play in transmitting theatrical ideas across national borders, and what does “transnational theater” look like outside of this infrastructure? What differentiates the productions of a perpetually homeless theater from those of its fixed-location counterparts? Why did travel and international circulation become a defining element of

⁶ Christopher Balme, “About the Project,” Global Theatre Histories Website. <http://global-theatre-histories.org/about/> (accessed March 21, 2013).

⁷ Rebecca Kobrin, *Jewish Bialystok and Its Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 5.

the modern stage? These questions, I would like to suggest, are not tangential, but in fact vital for the development of a vigorous critical vocabulary via which to assess the globalism of the modern stage.

Accordingly, I propose adding a new term to the lexicon of transnational theater discourse: “fusion modernism.” Fusion modernism is a descriptor of the distinct aesthetic developed by the Vilna Troupe, which merged together the stylistic ideas and staging practices that Vilna Troupe actors encountered as they toured. Simply put, “fusion modernism” is an artistic strategy in which travel and cross-cultural interaction fuel creative innovation. In the case of the Vilna Troupe’s celebrated world premiere production of *The Dybbuk*, for example, the production was essentially a fusion of the Moscow Art Theater’s ensemble playing style combined with the German expressionism of Max Reinhardt and the modernist neo-Romanticism of avant-garde Polish directors in Warsaw, all blended together within a decidedly Jewish framework. The Vilna Troupe was widely considered by interwar spectators and critics to be at the cutting edge of avant-garde theater practice. For the company members, however, the incorporation of globally sourced experimental sensibilities into their productions was hardly intentional or even necessarily conscious. In fact, the members of the Vilna Troupe were *accidental* modernists whose “fusion modernism” had more to do with the conditions of Jewish life in Eastern Europe than avant-garde ambition. Thus decades later, one Vilna Troupe actor attending his first Beckett production would respond to claims of the playwright’s modernist achievements: “Modern style, my foot! I pioneered theater of the absurd back in the Twenties!”:

By its nature, the infant Jewish theater had to be absurd because it grew out of the absurd situation of the Jews of Czarist Russia. [...] When they [Jewish actors] recognized spies entering the makeshift theatre and infiltrating the audience, they would send a signal to the stage. Then, abruptly, the actors would switch from the Yiddish script they were performing. An actor from Poland would begin declaiming in Polish. A Hungarian actress would answer him in Magyar. A couple of actors who only knew Yiddish would

carry on a dialogue in meaningless gibberish – “*Nov shmoz kapop...*” And so on. The audience, in on the ruse, would listen to this babble impassively. As for the spies, they would observe in puzzled bewilderment. [...] There you have it: a dozen actors on a bare stage, each one speaking a different language. Alienation, failure of communication, absence of objective meaning – all the elements of Theatre of the Absurd. And it was invented a century ago by Jewish actors out of grim necessity.⁸

Coy though it may be, Joseph Buloff’s description of a major modernist playwright subconsciously hewing to an aesthetic sensibility invented by Eastern European Jewry reflects how the artists of the Vilna Troupe thought of their work: Yiddish theater had something unique to offer the world at large. Simply put, the Yiddish stage – due to its dually tenuous position within Jewish culture and vis-à-vis the outside world – was uniquely capable of expanding its spectators’ conceptions of what theater could be. But unlike previous generations of Yiddish actors, the members of the Vilna Troupe also were extremely well versed in avant-garde artistic currents of the period. Hence the development of the Vilna Troupe’s distinct brand of “fusion modernism,” which allowed the company to simultaneously draw upon traditional Jewish life *and* recent trends in European experimental theater for inspiration.

This dissertation presents an alternative history of the theatrical avant-garde from the perspective of those Jewish theater artists who participated in it most fully. The Vilna Troupe and the dozens of “Yiddish art theater” companies it inspired during the interwar period were, in fact, seminal institutions in the development of the modern theatrical avant-garde. For decades, the Vilna Troupe artists have been wrongly confined to the margins of theater history, their names – Dovid Herman, Leib Kadison, Alexander Azro, Sonia Alomis, Noah Nachbush, Chaim Shniur, Bela Belarina, Mordechai Mazo, Miriam Orleska, Joseph Buloff, Luba Kadison, Jacob

⁸ Buloff, “How the Yiddish Theatre Invented Theatre of the Absurd,” 2-3. Written after attending an unidentified production of two short Beckett plays directed by Jack Garfein at the Clurman Theatre, probably in the early 1980’s. On Czarist spies trying to determine the language of Jewish theater productions during the Russian Empire’s ban on Yiddish theater, see Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 57-58.

and Yocheved Waislitz, among others – virtually unknown among students of modernist theater. And yet, if we remove the nation-based categorical blinders that color traditional historical thinking, these actors become central figure in a reinscribed *transnational* history of the twentieth century stage. For we cannot fully understand the world of Max Reinhardt, David Belasco, and Eugene Ionesco; or the atmosphere in which the Moscow Art Theater embarked on its celebrated first cross-continental tour in 1923; or the forces that shaped the work of the Group Theater and other experimental companies founded during the interwar period without accounting for the activities of these Yiddish theater artists who functioned as border-crossing agents of intercultural transmission. The history of the Vilna Troupe and the Yiddish art theater stage is thus no minority branch of theater history, but in fact, one of its most central and canonical chapters.

Methodology

A monograph about the Vilna Troupe is by definition a study in contradictions. The Vilna Troupe first emerged in Vilna and yet had remarkably little to do with the city itself; its actors would be forever known as *Vilner* (which roughly translates to “those people from Vilna”), even though most of them never actually lived there. The *Vilner* were permanently homeless, and yet, they were equally “at home” almost anywhere in the Yiddish-speaking world. The Troupe drew creative inspiration from its transnational wanderings, but at the same time sought to express Jewish *national* aspirations. The Vilna Troupe was both a discrete Jewish cultural institution and a cluster of independent theater companies. To outsiders, each Vilna Troupe vehemently denied the existence of the others; among fellow Troupemates, it was readily understood that the existence of multiple Vilna Troupe companies was a crucial element of their brand. In matters of

repertoire and aesthetic, the Vilna Troupe was equal parts Jewish and European. So too were their audiences. Like the subtitle of *The Dybbuk*, the most famous play in the company's repertoire, the Vilna Troupe perpetually operated at the interstices "between two worlds."

Encompassing seven distinct companies, hundreds of actors, and dozens of directors and designers across five continents at the height of its influence, the Vilna Troupe was a transnational theater phenomenon unparalleled in the history of the modern stage.

Methodologically, this project thus draws upon recent scholarship addressing the transnational circulation of artistic ideas, aesthetics, and artifacts. Christopher Balme's study of the performativity of intercultural interaction in his *Pacific Performances: Theatricality and Cross-Cultural Encounter in the South Seas* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) enabled me to better understand the Vilna Troupe's dual role as artists and intercultural mediators. Balme's notion of "citational practices," in which performers and spectators "draw upon common, but not necessarily congruent repertoires of knowledge," as endemic to intercultural performance also holds deep relevance for this project.⁹ Like Balme's traveling Pacific performers in Hawai'i and New Zealand, the Vilna Troupe relied upon similar "citational practices" to build the diverse global audiences that fueled its success. Likewise, Daphne Pi-Wei Lei's reading of diasporic performance as occurring in the "contact zone" (e.g. the site where two or more cultures or ideologies come into conflict) also proved useful in thinking about the kinds of cultural clashing at play in the initial encounters between the Jewish-language art theaters and their European counterparts.¹⁰ May Joseph's *Nomadic Identities: The Performance of Citizenship* (Minnesota, 1999), which investigates how citizenship is forged via travel and performance, provided another

⁹ Christopher Balme, *Pacific Performances: Theatricality and Cross-Cultural Encounter in the South Seas* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 2.

¹⁰ Daphne Pi-Wei Lei, *Operatic China: Staging Chinese Identity Across the Pacific* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 2-3.

critical touchstone for this study. Though Joseph describes “nomadic citizenship” as a postmodern condition, the artists of the interwar Yiddish art theater movement were, precisely like Joseph’s subjects, “political, legal, economic, and cultural nomad[s] [...] forced to perform citizenship across as well as *within* national boundaries.”¹¹

One of the greatest challenges in writing theater history from a global angle is negotiating the inevitable gaps between transnational and local perspectives. In the case of the Vilna Troupe, which actually represented a dizzying array of independent companies, theater artists, and aesthetic ideas, one must also find the balance between each actor’s idiosyncratic experience of being a *Vilner* and the collective development of the movement more broadly. All too often, entering into the world of the Vilna Troupe feels like walking into a hall of mirrors, where the image before you is always changing. With actors constantly cycling in and out of multiple Vilna Troupe companies, all of which were always on the move, the definition of what “the Vilna Troupe” meant was always shifting for actors and audiences alike. At any given historical moment, “the Vilna Troupe” might have meant one thing in Warsaw but signified something else altogether in New York or Melbourne. This dissertation thus also contends with the limitations of writing theater history in this sort of transnational context. The Vilna Troupe was a profoundly unstable cultural signifier, and yet, it was a vibrant theater movement with a tremendous impact. The company’s transnationalism is precisely what makes it so interesting *and* what makes it so challenging to assess; for any history of the Vilna Troupe that is perfectly tidy and has no loose ends could be only fiction. In honing in on a subject that is a moving target via several methodologies, this study explores different ways of negotiating the “messiness” that comes with writing transnational theater history.

¹¹ May Joseph, *Nomadic Identities: The Performance of Citizenship* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 17.

Structure

The first four chapters of this dissertation present a chronological narrative of the emergence of the Vilna Troupe and the subsequent development of a Yiddish art theater movement between 1905 and 1930. Chapter 1, “‘Waiting at the Footlights’: The Campaign for a Yiddish Art Theater” considers early twentieth century precursors to the formation of a cohesive Yiddish art theater movement during the interwar period. In particular, I examine the failed “theater campaign” of the classical Yiddish writer Y.L. Peretz and his disciples Peretz Hirschbein and Dovid Pinski between 1905 and 1912. These figures were responsible for introducing the idea of “art theater” to Jewish intellectuals, and though they failed to actually create a successful Yiddish art theater, their failures laid the theoretical, aesthetic, and practical groundwork for the Vilna Troupe’s subsequent emergence during the First World War.

The next three chapters hone in on the Vilna Troupe’s rapid rise to prominence. Chapter 2 covers the Vilna Troupe’s origins and its first few seasons (1915-1919). I detail how the large-scale wartime dislocations of Eastern European Jewry created the necessary preconditions for the company’s emergence. The second half of the chapter treats the Vilna Troupe’s 1917 reorganization as a traveling company, its legendary first arrival in Warsaw, and the role of a second rival Vilna Troupe in establishing the company’s reputation.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on two key elements of the Vilna Troupe phenomenon: modernism and transnationalism, respectively. The third chapter, “The Turn to Modernism,” considers two landmark Vilna Troupe productions vis-à-vis the company’s gradual (and fraught) embrace of a modernist aesthetic between 1920 and 1924. I first discuss the Vilna Troupe’s iconic 1920 world premiere of *The Dybbuk* as a dual turning point marking (1) the company’s shift away from imitative naturalism and towards a new ethos of modernist experimentation and

(2) the emergence of a discrete international Yiddish art theater *movement* inspired by the Vilna Troupe's success. The second half of this chapter examines the company's innovative 1924 production of Osip Dimov's *The Singer of His Sorrow*, which set a new experimental standard for Jewish theatrical modernism. Chapter 4 covers the years 1924 – 1930 and focuses on the company's growing transnational orientation and infrastructure. I locate the Vilna Troupe as a global brand that came to signify a particular set of ideas about Yiddish theater, and as a "world theater" that sought above all to establish its reputation in a transnational context.

The fifth and final chapter of this dissertation considers the Vilna Troupe's legacy. This chapter combines a brief chronological account of the Vilna Troupe's dissolution (1930 – 1935) with two new methodological approaches – network theory and microhistory – in order to illuminate the company's multifaceted impact. I first detail the emergence of a transnational artistic network centered around the artists of the Vilna Troupe using social network visualization, then trace the career trajectory of a single family of Vilna Troupe actors. A tight focus on a single family of *Vilner* demonstrates the geographical expansion of the Yiddish art theater movement to new locales, including South America, Africa, and Australasia. Finally, the epilogue includes my personal reflections on the process of writing the first monograph about the Vilna Troupe, and points towards the significance of the Yiddish art theater movement for our understanding of modern Jewish culture at large.

In 1919, on the heels of the Vilna Troupe's triumphant return to Warsaw, a group of theater artists including *Vilner* Mordechai Mazo and Isaac Samberg founded Poland's first Jewish Actors' Union (in Yiddish: *Yidisher Artistn Fareyn* or YAF).¹² Though the YAF

¹² The union was officially registered with the Polish government as Związek Artystów Scen Żydowskich (ZASŻ). See Marek Web, "Yiddish Actors' Union," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 2058-2059.

officially claimed to represent all Yiddish theater artists, in practice it was an organ of the Yiddish art theater movement: alongside stipulations regarding actor wages, contracts, pensions, health insurance, and unemployment relief, the union's bylaws included eradicating lowbrow repertoire and elevating the artistic standards of the Yiddish stage as among its primary goals. Officially, according to the terms of its registration with the Polish government, the YAF was simply the Jewish equivalent of the Union of Polish Theater Artists (Związek Artystów Scen Polskich). Like its Polish counterpart, the YAF was an active member of the short-lived International Union of Theater Artists, which included 21 constituent theater union companies from across Europe and the United States.

But while the other organizations in the International Union each represented theater artists from a single country, the YAF's activities extended far beyond the borders of Poland to the outermost reaches of the transnational Yiddish art theater movement at large. The Dansk Skuespiller Forbund represented Danish actors, the Svenska Teaterförbundet represented Swedish actors, the Budapesti Szineszek Szövertzege represented Hungarian actors, and the Actors' Equity Association represented American actors. Only in the Yiddish union did actors come together across national borders.¹³ In its official documents and correspondence, the union maintained the fiction that it was a national actors' union just like the others, but the membership rolls told the real truth. At any given time, nearly a quarter of the YAF's active members resided abroad. Those who provided permanent addresses in Poland were, in fact, out of the country more often than not, and the YAF thus maintained active correspondence with actors and Yiddish theater companies in 25 countries: Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Czechoslovakia, Danzig (an independent city-state between 1920 and 1939), Denmark, France,

¹³ The only exception was the Union des Artistes de Langue Francais, which had one branch for French actors and another for Belgian actors. Correspondence with the International Union of Theater Artists, 1927-1929, Yidisher Artistn Fareyn Papers (RG 26), Box 1, Folder 240. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York, NY.

Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, Romania, South Africa, Switzerland, the United States, the USSR, and Yugoslavia.

There could be no such thing as a *national* actors' union for the artists of the interwar Yiddish art theater. For theirs was a movement with outposts virtually everywhere that Eastern European Jews lived. More than any other group, it was the Vilna Troupe that was responsible for transforming the Yiddish stage into a theater more *global* than virtually any other in history. The *Vilner* enacted a radical shift in the way that Jews and non-Jews alike thought about the Yiddish stage. This is the story of their transnational revolution.

Chapter One:
Waiting at the Footlights:
The Campaign for a Yiddish Art Theater (1905 – 1911)

On a cold February evening in 1910, an audience unlike any that had ever before attended a Yiddish theater production gathered in Warsaw to see a performance by the Hirschbein Troupe, a company that promised a new era of literary and artistic integrity for the Yiddish stage. Virtually every professional Yiddish writer in the city was present on opening night, including literary critic Dovid Frishman, playwrights Jacob Dinezon and Sholem Asch, and, seated prominently in the front row, Yitskhok Leybush Peretz (1852 – 1915), the central figure at the heart of Warsaw’s thriving Yiddish culture. Looking around the elaborately decorated theater, the writers and critics who dominated the audience giddily discussed the prospect of a new kind of Yiddish theater that would align with the goals of Jewish intellectuals. The beautification of the shabby theater building reminded Yiddish poet Avrom Reisen of Peretz’s oft-invoked pronouncement that the Yiddish stage would one day become a sacred Temple of Art. As for Peretz himself, the famous writer was so excited that he scarcely noticed when his colleagues sitting next to him, the theater critic Alexander Kappel (who wrote under the pseudonym Alexander Mukdoyni) and the writer Ayzik Meyer Devenishki (better known by his pseudonym A. Vayter), tried to engage him in conversation before the curtain. The lights began to dim and the audience hushed expectantly. As Mukdoyni later recalled:

Finally, the curtain rose. Peretz, who sat next to me, actually let out an audible groan of bitter disappointment. The stage was prepared so tastelessly, so asymmetrically, and the setting was so drably pedantic that you simply had to avert your eyes. The performance

itself was no better. [...] Tedious, long, and unfilled pauses struck a nerve. The actors wandered about the stage like shadows. [...] We could hardly wait until the play ended.¹⁴

Many spectators did not wait and abruptly left the theater during intermission. Peretz remained seated in his place, rigid with disappointment. He did not say a word.

Over a decade before the emergence of the Vilna Troupe, the movement to create an “art theater” in Yiddish began with a series of extraordinary failures. A cadre of prominent Jewish intellectuals based in Warsaw organized several ambitious attempts to create a high art theater in Yiddish that would be modeled directly upon European counterparts like the Moscow Art Theater and the Independent Theaters of Western Europe. Yiddish theater lagged far behind Yiddish literature – to say nothing of modern European culture – in its development, lamented a new generation of theater critics in the pages of Warsaw’s Yiddish newspapers and journals. For too long, intellectuals had focused their attention on Jewish literature while completely neglecting the Yiddish stage. In relegating theatrical activity to the background of modern Jewish culture “like a waiter at a wedding to which he has not been invited,” Jewish intellectuals had allowed the Yiddish stage to become contaminated with lowbrow “*shund*” – a pejorative term for trashy, raucous, poorly written, melodramatic, and anti-intellectual entertainment lacking in artistic intent.¹⁵ The Yiddish stage thus did not merely need reform; it required a total revolution.

Between 1905 and the beginning of the first World War, what became known in the Yiddish press as the “*teater-frage*” (“theater question”) became the subject of vigorous debate among Polish Jewish intellectuals. For the first time, Eastern European Jewish writers began to actively engage with the Yiddish theater, publishing hundreds of articles and reviews that

¹⁴ Dr. A. Mukdoyni, “Zikhroynes fun a yidishn teater-kritiker: yidisher teater in Poyln fun 1909 biz 1915” in *Arkhip far der geshikhṭe fun yidishn teater un drame*, ed. Jacob Shatzky (Vilna: YIVO, 1930), 381-382. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁵ For a brief history of *shund*, see Nathaniel Buchwald, *Teater* (New York: Farlag Komitet Teater, 1943), 305-318. Buchwald argues that *shund* is an inherently conservative genre whose primary function is to reinforce the status quo.

proposed a variety of solutions to the “theater crisis” and began to articulate a unified vision for what “better” Yiddish theater should be: a repertoire drawn from the best of Yiddish literature, lengthy rehearsal periods, educated and well-trained actors, thoughtful set and costume designs, and respectful, well-behaved audiences.¹⁶ These writers sought to adopt the art theater model prevalent in Russia and Western Europe in order to reinvent the Yiddish theater as a high-culture institution. Yet unlike their non-Jewish art theater counterparts, who were far more interested in artistic integrity than in furthering any national cause, the Jewish intellectuals who orchestrated these efforts envisioned their art theater project as having twin aesthetic and national aims. In a peculiar merger of the ideology of 18th and 19th century national theater movements with that of the early 20th century theatrical avant-garde, these writers dreamed of a Yiddish art theater would be simultaneously dedicated to high art ideals *and* to securing the legitimacy of modern Jewish culture in the eyes of other nations. In the words of one writer, the campaign for a Yiddish art theater was “no private whim” but in fact “a type of national creation.”¹⁷

One writer stood at the center of the theater debate in the pages of the Yiddish press. This same person was behind each of the failed efforts to found a Yiddish art theater – Y.L. Peretz.

This chapter traces Peretz’s succession of attempts to revolutionize the Yiddish stage between 1905 and 1911. First, I examine how Peretz and his Warsaw-based literary coterie developed a new set of criteria for the Yiddish stage that brought theater reform to the forefront of modern Yiddish culture. What became known as “Peretz’s theater campaign” began as a journalistic crusade in Warsaw’s Yiddish press that established a particular discourse around the

¹⁶ The polemic between artistic *kunst* and trashy *shund* had long been an established element of Yiddish literary debates prior to 1905. However, as Michael Steinlauf has argued, the language used to distinguish between art and trash was significantly more extreme in Yiddish theater criticism. “On the one hand, there is a theater described as ‘better’, ‘higher’, ‘refined’ (*eydl*), ‘artistic’, ‘literary’, on the other side a theater that becomes the object of extraordinary abuse and rage, of what amounts to a cultural holy war.” Michael C. Steinlauf, “Fear of Purim: Y.L. Peretz and the Canonization of Yiddish Theater,” *Jewish Social Studies* 1.3 (Spring 1995): 45.

¹⁷ Peretz Hirschbein, *In gang fun lebn: zikhroyenes* (New York, Tsiko, 1948), 269.

concept of Yiddish art theater. I then consider how Peretz's idealistic Yiddish art theater dreams culminated in a series of practical catastrophes: first, a disappointing collaboration with chagrined Yiddish actors seeking a new direction; followed by the Hirschbein Troupe's embarrassing missteps under Peretz's guidance; and finally, Peretz's abortive attempt to create a Yiddish art theater company of his own. Yet in spite of Peretz's tremendous disappointment at these failures and his ultimate estrangement from the Yiddish theater altogether, this theater campaign inspired Jewish intellectuals to actively invest in the future of the Yiddish stage. All of Peretz's projects to reform the Yiddish stage may have failed, but they were *significant* failures that ultimately allowed for the long-term success of precisely the kind of Yiddish art theater that Peretz had envisioned. It was these early efforts that laid the polemical, aesthetic, and practical foundations for the subsequent emergence of the Vilna Troupe nearly a decade later – and with it, the rise of a Yiddish art theater movement that would succeed beyond Peretz's wildest dreams.

PART ONE: HIGH HOPES

1905: The Floodgates Open

During the last decades of the 19th century, when Yiddish literature was experiencing an infusion of astonishing creativity, the Yiddish theater entered a period of nearly complete stagnation. Less than a decade after the emergence of the first professional Yiddish theater companies in the mid-1870's, Yiddish theater in Eastern Europe came to a halt in 1883 when the

Russian Imperial government enacted a ban on all Yiddish performances.¹⁸ While the ban prohibited Yiddish theater in no uncertain terms, its enforcement depended largely upon the whims of local officials, and it was thus not entirely effective.¹⁹ By 1900, Yiddish theater was so widespread in some parts of the Empire that many local authorities erroneously believed that the ban had been lifted.²⁰ Bribery, however, did not work everywhere: in cities and towns with larger Jewish populations, the ban was more strictly enforced.²¹ Still, though it failed to prevent some actors from performing, the Yiddish theater ban was extremely effective at deepening the already existing chasm between an elite Yiddish literary culture aspiring to world recognition and the popular theater of the Jewish masses. For writers like Peretz, who sought to build a *legitimate* Yiddish literary culture that would be recognized as on par with the literature of its co-territorial European neighbors, the illegal and *illegitimate* Yiddish theater could not be part of their culture-building project. The underground Yiddish theater that existed in pockets of the Empire between 1883 and 1905 was thus virtually ignored by the Jewish intelligentsia, who preferred to attend the more “refined” (and legal) Polish and Russian theaters.

All of this changed in 1905 when the Yiddish theater ban was loosened in the aftermath of the first Russian Revolution. Though it was still not officially lifted, the weakening of Tsarist absolutism and the subsequent relaxation of the Yiddish theater ban combined gave many the

¹⁸ Because of the ban, most of the best Yiddish actors and directors left Russia for England or America, including Goldfaden, Jacob Adler, Boris Thomashefsky, and Zigmund Mogulesko. The departure of talented actors and directors contributed significantly to the stagnation of Yiddish theater during this period.

¹⁹ John Klier, in his analysis of the “widespread failure” of the ban, provides a comprehensive list (168-170) of documented Yiddish theater performances between 1883 and 1905. See Klier, “‘Exit, Pursued by a Bear’: The Ban on Yiddish Theatre in Imperial Russia” in *Yiddish Theatre: New Approaches*, ed. Joel Berkowitz (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003): 159-174.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 171.

²¹ Warsaw, Vilna, Berdichev, Zhitomir, and many other major cities allowed virtually no Yiddish theater performances. In some cases, entire provinces (among them Kiev, Chernigov, Vohlyn, Poltava, and Grodno) strictly enforced the ban while others ignored it altogether. See David E. Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 27.

impression that the prohibition had, in fact, been formally retracted.²² Russian and Yiddish newspapers throughout the Empire mistakenly reported that the ban had been withdrawn, and most local authorities followed their lead. The perceived removal of the ban had an immediate impact on the urban Jewish intelligentsia. For the first time in twenty-two years, Yiddish writers began to consider seriously the place of the Yiddish stage in Jewish cultural life. No longer artificially cut-off from their theater by government edict, Jewish intellectuals found themselves horrified to “discover” the artistic limitations of the contemporary Yiddish stage.

The growing interest in theater among Jewish intellectuals was directly inspired by the politically charged atmosphere of this period. As Yiddish theater historian Nathanial Buchwald recalled, “The zeal to revolutionize the Yiddish stage had within it something of the earlier zeal to revolutionize political and social life overall.”²³ Stirred by the revolutionary atmosphere of 1905, Yiddish writers began to imagine a theatrical revolution that would once and for all prove the legitimacy of modern Jewish culture.

This revitalized Yiddish theater was to be modeled upon the artistically inspired productions of the European art theaters. Indeed, the emergence of a strong interest in the theater among Jewish writers paralleled an earlier trend among Russian writers who had turned their attention en masse from short stories and novels to the drama in the late nineteenth century, inspired by Chekhov. Yiddish writers were likewise encouraged by the example of their Russian

²² The Yiddish theater ban came under governmental review in 1905 but was not repealed. However, a general loosening of the enforcement of the ban led many, including several influential Yiddish journalists, to assume that the ban had in fact been lifted alongside the retraction of other censorship regulations. Many newspapers thus erroneously reported that the ban had been withdrawn. While some isolated authorities were still enforcing the ban as late as 1909, most major cities and towns simply stopped enforcing the ban in 1905. Klier, 172-173.

²³ Buchwald, 386-387.

counterparts to take up an interest in dramatic literature.²⁴ Unlike Russian writers, however, aspiring Yiddish playwrights had been legally barred from staging their work for decades. Only after 1905 could they seek the kind of success achieved by Chekhov, Gorky, Andreyev, and others when their work became internationally famous through the productions of the Moscow Art Theater.

With the abolition of government censorship of the Yiddish press in 1905, Jewish intellectuals also began to found dozens of Yiddish journals and newspapers. Less than a year after the government loosened its restrictions against Yiddish publishers, Warsaw could boast of five thriving Yiddish dailies with a combined circulation of nearly 100,000.²⁵ A public debate over the future of the Yiddish theater quickly emerged in the pages of these new press organs, providing an unprecedented opportunity for Jewish intellectuals to discuss the orientation, goals, and artistic program of the Yiddish theater before a massive readership.²⁶

By 1905, a middle-aged Peretz had established his reputation as the predominant figure of modern Yiddish literature. His was a towering and intimidating presence for the hundreds of aspiring writers who flocked to Warsaw to earn the approval that would virtually guarantee the success of their literary careers.²⁷ Peretz was constantly surrounded by a dynamic circle of

²⁴ Dovid Pinski wrote of the influence of Russian writers-turned-dramatists on the Yiddish writers of his generation. See “Perets Hirshbayn der dramatiker” in *Teater, veltrayzes, zikhroynes*, ed. Shmuel Rozshanski (Buenos Aires: Literatur Gezelshaft Baym YIVO in Argentine, 1967): 316-320. For Pinski’s analysis of the “theater fever” that emerged after 1905, see 317.

²⁵ Michael C. Steinlauf, “Polish-Jewish Theater: The Case of Mark Arnshteyn. A Study of the Interplay Among Yiddish, Polish, and Polish-Language Jewish Culture in the Modern Period” (Ph.D. Diss., Brandeis University, 1988), 149.

²⁶ This chapter considers how the Yiddish theater debate that emerged in Warsaw between 1905-1911 laid the theoretical foundations for the subsequent emergence of the Vilna Troupe. As such, I do not consider similar developments in the United States in this chapter. The central ideology that came to define the Yiddish art theater movement developed primarily in Warsaw, not New York.

²⁷ A chapter detailing the nervous young writer’s pilgrimage to Warsaw to meet Peretz and humbly request his feedback was a staple in the memoir of nearly every Yiddish writer active during this period.

admirers who volunteered their support and helped him organize his myriad literary and cultural activities. Through their efforts to raise the status of Yiddish writing, Peretz and his disciples had largely succeeded in transforming Yiddish literature into a thriving literary institution. Given his profile as the leading architect of modern Yiddish literary culture, we might imagine an aging Peretz resting on his laurels and enjoying the fruits of his labor during the final years of his life. Instead, an ever-restless Peretz became obsessed with the notion of reforming the Yiddish stage.

Peretz's interest in the theater had developed early in life. As a child, he had become familiar with nearly the entire corpus of Yiddish *Haskalah* [Jewish Enlightenment] drama by attending readings at the home of his uncle, a prominent *maskil*.²⁸ Peretz's memoirs recall an adolescent with a voracious appetite for the stage. As a young man, he frequented theatrical performances in Polish and German, and was particularly enthralled with German playwright August von Kotzebue and Polish dramatist Franciszek Zabłocki.²⁹ Described by his colleagues as a man with a "theater soul" and a "theatrical zeal," Peretz began using theatrical metaphors early in his literary career. In one early poem, he presented his own version of Shakespeare's famous line: "The world is a theater. / God is the director – the play is nice, / Unfortunately, the devil is the prompter."³⁰ Soon, he began writing his own dramas. Peretz's first dramatic dialogue "Er un zi" ["He and She"] dates from 1894; another dramatic fragment in verse, *Bay dem fremdn khupelkleyd* [*With the Strange Wedding Gown*], was published two years later. In 1899, Peretz published *A literatur-stsene* [*A Literary Scene*]; in 1902, he wrote two dramatic satires and

²⁸ Proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment were known as *maskilim*. On Peretz's childhood, see Zalmen Zylbercweig, ed. *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, 6 vols. (New York, Warsaw, and Mexico City, 1931–69), 3:1899.

²⁹ Yitzkhok Turkow-Grudberg, *Y.L. Perets – der veker: tsu der 50-ter yortsayt* (Tel Aviv: Farlag Y.L. Peretz, 1965), 27. Hereafter referred to as *Perets der veker*. August von Kotzebue (1761-1819) was a controversial German dramatist who spoke out against the anti-Semitism of student nationalists and was assassinated by a militant university student. Franciszek Zabłocki (1754-1821) was a Polish playwright renowned for his satirical comedies.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

dozens of scene fragments in Hebrew and in Yiddish. By 1903, Peretz had completed the first Hebrew-language draft of what would ultimately become his most famous Yiddish play *Di goldene keyt* [*The Golden Chain*], and by 1904, he had begun to publish one-acts.³¹ The ban on performing in Yiddish mattered little to Peretz, since at this point, he was far more interested in bringing dramatic form to Yiddish literature than in actually staging any of his work. By the time of the first Russian Revolution, Peretz's initial forays into playwriting had earned him the reputation of a budding and ambitious Yiddish dramatist, adding to his established stature as a famous short story author, poet, and critic. Still, many critics were skeptical that his plays could withstand stage production. Literary critic Shmuel Niger described Peretz as "more of a subjective lyricist than a powerful playwright," and Peretz's other major biographers concurred that writing for the stage was perhaps not Peretz's greatest strength.³²

After 1905, however, Peretz turned his famous theatrical zeal to a new goal. Instead of writing dramas for a small and elite community of literary aficionados, Peretz refocused his attention on staging the literary dramas of rising Yiddish playwrights (himself included) in hopes of reforming what he viewed as the excesses of the contemporary Yiddish stage. An overhaul of the Yiddish theater, he reasoned, could only be accomplished by developing a new Yiddish "art theater" that would stand in stark opposition to any other Yiddish production that had come before it – which he unilaterally lumped together under the derogatory label "*shund*."³³ Of

³¹ Shmuel Niger, *Y. L. Perets: zayn lebn, zayn firndikn perzenlekhkayt* (Buenos Aires: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1952), 422. Niger points out that several Yiddish literary scholars (including Nakhman Mayzel) had erroneously considered Peretz's *Khurban beit tsadik* in 1903 to be his first dramatic work.

³² See Ibid., 432 and Turkow-Grudberg, *Perets der veker*, 27. As Niger notes (421), critics loved to describe Peretz's personality using theatrical metaphors. Turkow-Grudberg takes Niger's point a step further in arguing that the most theatrical parts of Peretz's oeuvre were, in fact, fully present in what was ostensibly his non-dramatic fiction.

³³ Steinlauf has suggested that Peretz's antagonism to *shund* may have been based in part on the relationship between the Jewish underworld and the pre-1905 outlawed Yiddish stage. Steinlauf posits that some of Peretz's

course, the line separating literary “art theater” from “trash” was at times exceedingly thin, and Peretz frequently employed these categories as a means of distancing his work from the competition. In the post-1905 Warsaw Yiddish press, *shund*/trash and *kunst*/art were often interpreted in ways that were more reflective of a critics’ own relationship to Peretz’s campaign rather than the actual artistic merits of the play or production itself. Indeed, Peretz never was able to provide a clear definition of what separated “artistic” Yiddish theater from its trashier counterparts. And what about work that straddled the border between mindless entertainment and probing artistry, as was common on the Yiddish stage? The occasional melodrama penned by an established “literary” writer like Jacob Gordin, for example? Peretz shied away from these types of questions; and certainly, it was to his advantage to do so. One thing was for certain – Peretz’s positioning of his projects as belonging solely to the “high art” side of a *shund/kunst* polemic was extremely effective way of attracting public attention to his theater campaign.

As with all of Peretz’s literary and cultural projects, a group of prominent intellectuals followed his lead. They dedicated their careers to his project of Yiddish theater reform, creating what amounted to an unofficial school of Yiddish theater criticism determined to overthrow the theatrical establishment. Beginning in 1905, this group – which included playwright Yankev Dinezon, writer and journalist A. Vayter, aspiring director Dovid Herman, and theater critic Alexander Mukdoyni – pronounced their demands in a series of articles, letters, and reviews published in the Warsaw Yiddish press.³⁴

attacks on the Yiddish theater as “despicable” and “intolerable” may well have been coded references to prostitution and the Warsaw Jewish underworld. Steinlauf, “Fear of Purim,” 52.

³⁴ Tukow-Grudberg considers these four figures (Dinezon, Vayter, Herman, and Mukdoyni) the primary supporters of Peretz’s theater campaign. Each had his strengths and his weaknesses. Dinezon was a great dramatist with little knowledge or interest in theater craft. Vayter was a lesser dramatist but his practical knowledge of the theater was significant, making him the “motor of all theater activities in Warsaw” and the strongest influence on Peretz in all matters of theatrical production. Herman was a brilliant director, but perhaps too young and naive for the task.

Peretz and his disciples argued that the Yiddish theater needed to be reinvented in order to serve the highest cultural ambitions and national aims of the Jewish people.³⁵ Their problem with the *shund* theater was not simply a matter of artistic debate or a question of modifying the repertoire. Rather, the Jewish intellectuals who took up “the theater question” after 1905 envisioned improving the Yiddish theater as a matter of crucial national import. The stakes were high, almost too high: indeed for these writers, the very survival of modern Yiddish culture seemed to hinge upon the success of their campaign.

“A Sea of Manure:” *Shund* and the Theatrical Establishment

The first task of these writers would be to convince their readership that the well-attended productions of Warsaw’s Yiddish theaters were, simply put, a disgrace. This was no easy charge – after all, the Yiddish theaters thus accused were extremely popular with the masses. By any account, *shund* theater was thriving in post-revolutionary Warsaw. In May 1905, Avrom Yitzkhok Kaminski had launched a Yiddish company at the Bagatela Garden (later renamed the “Winter Garden”) on the outskirts of the city.³⁶ Soon after, a theater producer named Kompanayets opened his Hermitage Theater in the Muranov neighborhood, a part of the city known for its long tradition of informal Yiddish beer hall performances. Popularly known as the Muranover Theater, Kompanyets’ troupe primarily performed melodramas for the city’s poorest

Mukdoyni, though a staunch supporter of Peretz in public, privately doubted that Peretz was the right person to create a Yiddish art theater. Turkow-Grudberg, *Perets der veker*, 47-48.

³⁵ Here I am indebted to Michael Steinlauf’s insightful discussion of Peretz’s desire to see Yiddish theater serve twin national and cultural aims. As Steinlauf argues, the Polish stage of this period provided Jews with a robust template for precisely this sort of theatrical project. Steinlauf, “Polish-Jewish Theater,” 154.

³⁶ Ironically, the Winter Garden was poorly insulated and often freezing in the wintertime. Still, this did not deter thousands of spectators from attending productions in sub-zero temperatures at Winter Garden every night of the week. The Winter Garden ultimately closed soon after the newly constructed Elysium Theater, which was more comfortable and less drafty, attracted the former Winter Garden theatergoers. Yitzkhok Turkow-Grudberg, *Varshe, dos vigele fun yidishn teater* (Warsaw: Yidish Bukh, 1956), 15-16.

Jewish inhabitants. These two theater companies were immediately and wildly popular, spurring another producer to capitalize on Warsaw's burgeoning Yiddish theater scene by founding the Novi Theater.³⁷ Within the space of just a few months, Warsaw had become home to three thriving professional Yiddish theaters. Aspiring Yiddish actors and directors from cities and towns throughout the Russian Empire flocked to Warsaw to seek their fortunes. Almost overnight, Warsaw had become a city of tens of thousands of *teater patriotn* – theater “patriots” or fans of particular performers who were fiercely loyal to their favorite actors.³⁸ In light of this recent rush of enthusiasm for the Warsaw's existing Yiddish theaters, the writers who sought to revolutionize the Yiddish stage knew that it would be an uphill battle.

Peretz launched his campaign against *shund* theater in dozens of Yiddish newspapers and periodicals. The contemporary Yiddish theater was a “*kol boy*” (“catchall”), he wrote in 1906, “like a pot of stew in the marketplace, and whatever you throw in, cooks; what's yours, what's stolen, what's fresh, what's old, even what's tainted.”³⁹ Worse still, Peretz charged, Warsaw's Yiddish theaters relied heavily upon artistically “impure” juxtapositions: the haphazard jumbling of dramatic genres; the unattributed amalgamation of original and plagiarized material; the mixing of various staging techniques and styles in performance. *Shund*, for Peretz and his disciples, was thus a triply offensive contamination of genre, dramatic writing, and staging with “tainted” elements. His colleagues followed their mentor's lead, writing scathing reviews that referred to the productions of the three operating Warsaw Yiddish theaters as “a flood of trash.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Turkow-Grudberg, *Varshe dos vigele*, 14-15.

³⁸ The use of the term “patriots” to describe the relationship between spectators and their favorite actors underscores the centrality of nationalism in the discourse surrounding the Yiddish stage. See also Nahma Sandrow's discussion of the *teater patriotn* phenomenon, 101-102.

³⁹ Translation by Michael Steinlauf. Quoted in Steinlauf, “Fear of Purim,” 49-50.

⁴⁰ Dr. A. Mukdonyi, *Yitskhok Leybush Perets un dos yidishe teater* (New York: IKUF, 1949), 142.

Peretz's reviews and editorials, some in his own name and others under the sardonic penname "Lucifer," described the Yiddish theaters of Warsaw in caustic and unsparing terms: "trash," "disgrace," "dangerous," "inappropriate," "diseased," "anti-aesthetic", and perhaps most notably, "foreign". Indeed, for Peretz the greatest crime of the Yiddish theater was precisely this *foreignness*: its "anti-Jewish" alienation from authentic Jewish life. Ironically, Peretz and his colleagues located the very authenticity missing from the Yiddish stage in the theaters of their European neighbors, arguing that these theaters were "less foreign" (and ironically, by implication, "more Jewish") because they represented real life, real emotions, and real people. In other words, Peretz's campaign for a new Yiddish theater was, in large part, a plea for theatrical realism in the guise of Jewish authenticity.

After all, if the *shund* Yiddish stage was truly "anti-Jewish," then who could blame Jewish intellectuals for abandoning this "foreign" and "inauthentic" theater in favor of its more "genuine" Gentile counterparts? To Peretz and his followers, this foreignness was readily apparent whenever an educated modern Jew attended a Yiddish play:

He feels that it is a lie! That it is a spider web and that *everything is foreign to him, tremendously and impossibly foreign*, every word, every gesture, every movement. And just as the makeup is foreign, so too is the actor. Wildly foreign thoughts and feelings and intricacies. And as soon as he can, *he runs to the truth – to the real Gentile theater*, where every word has its real meaning. Every gesture is natural and true. Where those who move about the stage are living people, not talking mannequins, and in their veins flows blood, not colored water; where you cry because it hurts, and you laugh when it is truly joyful!⁴¹

So far removed was this theater from modern Jewish life, argued Peretz, that Jewish intellectuals had no choice but to abandon the Yiddish stage altogether. The problem with Yiddish *shund* theater, then, was not merely that it promoted aesthetically displeasing "impure" theatrics; rather, for Peretz and his disciples the entire extant Yiddish stage tradition represented a particularly

⁴¹ Turkow-Grudberg, *Perets der veker*, 36-37. My emphasis.

noxious and insidious threat to their entire project of building a vibrant modern Jewish culture. In sharp contrast to the deceitful “spider web” of the Yiddish stage, bizarrely foreign to its most educated speakers, the Gentile theater represented artistic and emotional *authenticity*. The very existence of the Yiddish *shund* theater threatened Peretz’s lifelong project of shaping a modern Yiddish culture that would demonstrate once and for all the validity of Jewish cultural expression before the world at large.⁴²

Paradoxically, Peretz remained an avid attendee of the very *shund* theaters that he mercilessly attacked. Unlike many of his contemporaries, who expressed their disgust with the Yiddish stage by boycotting performances, Peretz adopted a two-pronged strategy in his attack on the Warsaw Yiddish theater; first, by staging demonstrative protests while attending *shund* productions; then by writing scathing reviews for the Yiddish press. Peretz often invited like-minded literary colleagues to join him in storming out of *shund* performances at especially melodramatic moments. But the young writers who accompanied him on these outings were shocked to find their mentor visibly enjoying elements of the show. The Yiddish writer Yankev Dinezon, one of Peretz’s most avid disciples, recalled attending one popular melodrama with the famous writer:

On a certain evening I went with Peretz to the Yiddish theater Elysium. Peretz swelled with pride at the singing and the dancing. But when the melodrama came to its dramatic section, Peretz stood up and demonstratively left the theater. With us went a quarter of the audience. Peretz came back in when they began to sing and dance again onstage. From this I understood that the intelligent Warsaw audience did not want to see a “play” that was a mixture of drama with farce, of tragedy with burlesque.⁴³

⁴² Ruth Wisse, in her study of Peretz’s influence on modern Jewish culture, characterized his literary aims thus: “From the mid-1880’s until his death at the beginning of World War I, he shaped literature in Yiddish, and to a lesser extent Hebrew, into *an expression and instrument of national cohesion* that would help to compensate the Jews for the absence of such staples of nationhood as political independence and territorial sovereignty.” My emphasis. Ruth R. Wisse, *I.L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), xiii. I contend that Peretz had similar goals in mind for the Yiddish stage.

⁴³ Quoted in Zylbercweig, 3:2021.

This begs the question: if Peretz's goal in attending the *shund* theaters was simply to agitate against them, why did he re-enter the theater for the big musical number? Moreover, why did the Yiddish theater's most vehement critic of the period continue to attend production after production of *shund*? Peretz's answer to this question varied depending on who was asking. To playwright and director Peretz Hirschbein, he replied that he enjoyed the "folksy" qualities of the musical numbers, but remained offended by the lowbrow quality of the dialogue.⁴⁴ To the Yiddish actor Boaz Young, Peretz proclaimed "I would rather see a nice joke in the Yiddish theater than the [...] much-advertised non-Yiddish literary plays."⁴⁵ In these two responses we find a precise articulation of the twin desires that motivated Peretz to attend the *shund* theater. Peretz wanted at one and the same time to raise the level of the Yiddish theatergoing public's taste *and* to encourage Jews to attend the Yiddish theater frequently. These dual aims required Peretz to simultaneously become a member of the audience and to try and influence its response.

Indeed, the mere act of placing Yiddish on stage was significant for Peretz. Any performance in Yiddish, regardless of its literary quality or lack thereof, was still preferable to Jews attending the Gentile theaters. In characteristic Peretz style, he convinced dozens of his friends and colleagues to join him in attending *shund* performances. Following in their idol's footsteps, young writers began their own reviews in droves, criticizing Warsaw's Yiddish theaters in the sharpest terms they could muster. Yiddish newspapers and periodicals were suddenly brimming with derisive theater reviews. These reviews, coming as they were from writers who had actually attended the *shund* productions and could speak directly to the concerns of audiences, carried a certain weight among intellectuals. Paradoxically, it was only when

⁴⁴ Sandrow, 209-210.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Zylbercweig, 3:2021.

Yiddish writers ceased to boycott the *shund* theater and instead became paying spectators that they could develop an effective critique against it.

And yet, Peretz's continued attendance at *shund* productions also reveals that he himself was not immune to the charms of Warsaw's extremely popular Yiddish theater companies. Though he would never admit it to his colleagues, Peretz was drawn to *shund* and loved it in his own way. After all, why else would he spend the last years of his life working tirelessly to improve it?

Others, however, were less forgiving of the *shund* theater's faults. When Mukdoyni first arrived in Warsaw in 1909, he took Peretz's advice and systematically attended and reviewed productions at each of Warsaw's Yiddish theaters. His reviews are typical of those written by Peretz's followers, emphasizing the same themes that Peretz introduced in his earliest theater criticism – that the *shund* theater is unnatural, artistically inadequate, anti-intellectual, inauthentic, and most disturbingly, encourages crude audience behavior unbefitting to Jews – but in a harsher tone. Mukdoyni, who had just returned from several years abroad in Western Europe, described his state of mind upon seeing his first *shund* performance:

I left the theater depressed. The play, the acting, and the audience – especially the audience – made the most dreadful impression on me. This audience laughed with their mouths pried open and sobbed crudely. And their faces were strange. I had never once imagined Jews with such faces: red, meaty faces and ugly gluttonous necks [...] Between the acts was a gluttonous buffet, a drunken orgy, people flung glasses of whiskey into their mouths, they gnawed on chicken drumsticks, they swallowed roasted gizzards, they ate standing up, and everyone's mouths were stuffed full with entire goose gizzards and livers. Their faces became terribly coarse, their eyes gluttonous, and their necks swollen. I left the theater in such a miserable mood that I could not even begin to write my review, which I had promised to bring early the next morning.⁴⁶

For a European-educated theater critic like Mukdoyni – a devotee of Andre Antoine's Théâtre Libre, Max Reinhardt's directing, and the acting of Sarah Bernhardt – the Yiddish *shund* theater

⁴⁶ Mukdoyni, "Zikhroynes," 347.

was a severe embarrassment. With its nightmarish panoply of physical and theatrical excess, it seemed to transform Jewish spectators into nearly unrecognizable animalistic entities. By invoking classic anti-Semitic tropes of vulgar Jewish physiognomy and behavior, Mukdoyni positioned *shund* as a dangerous contaminant that had the potential to undo everything that Jewish intellectuals had painstakingly achieved towards legitimating Jewish culture.

In his second review, Mukdoyni again focused on the audience rather than the performers. He called the spectators at the Muranover Theater “the most primitive in the world,” drawn “from the very darkest Warsaw cellars.”⁴⁷ Their behavior was no better than at the first performance: “Men cracked nuts, conversed, and elegantly courted the ladies. The women, for their part, shrieked coquettishly and, occasionally, broke out with language that caused one’s blood to curdle.”⁴⁸ It was at this point, Mukdoyni wrote, that he began to despair of his chosen profession as a Yiddish theater critic. Neither the audience nor the theater artists seemed to be paying much attention to the criticism of Warsaw’s literary intelligentsia.⁴⁹ Mukdoyni ended his “tour” of the Warsaw Yiddish theaters at the Elysium Theater, a building that accosted the theatergoer with the smell of rotten food upon entering. The performance was no better. “I could not imagine that ‘my people,’ my Jews could enjoy themselves in such a sea of manure,” a horrified Mukdoyni told his readers.⁵⁰

In dozens of similar reviews and editorials, Peretz’s followers accused Warsaw’s popular Yiddish theaters of breeding an artistically corrupted audience stripped of its ability to assess

⁴⁷ Mukdoyni, “Zikhroynes,” 353.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid. “The worst criticisms had no effect on this theater,” Mukdoyni wrote in his memoirs. “On the audience, of course not – *they did not read*. But even the actors and the director himself did not understand what we wanted from them and what we demanded.” My emphasis.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 353-354.

aesthetic value. This, wrote the critics, was largely a matter of improper training and was not necessarily the fault of the actors themselves, who were hobbled by their lack of a formal theatrical and Jewish literary education. To Peretz, the basic problem of the Yiddish theater was that it had the relationship between writers and actors precisely backwards:

The stage, our stage, holds fast to its desire for the poet to be in its service [...] The poet ought to wash the hands of the common man [...] I don't know a single actor, let alone a theater director, who is well-versed in Yiddish literature and can choose [a repertoire]... They wait for us to come to them, to write for the star actor, for his preoccupations... And art [*kunst*]... she weeps!⁵¹

Without a proper literary education, Peretz argued, Yiddish actors and directors were simply not capable of producing – let alone understanding – true theatrical art. Their entire orientation to the Yiddish literary world was antithetical to the requirements of the serious stage. But for this fallacy, Jewish intellectuals could only blame themselves, for writers had avoided the Yiddish stage for far too long. If intellectuals did not take up the task of reforming the Yiddish theater, warned Peretz, their own livelihoods would soon be in jeopardy. For if spectators corrupted by *shund* theater lost their ability to distinguish between trash and art on the Yiddish stage, how could anyone count upon this same public to support the continued development of a high-art Yiddish literature and culture? Thus, Jewish writers bore a particular responsibility to rescue the public from the polluting influence of the *shund* stage. This could be accomplished only by providing the masses with a viable alternative. While Peretz and his followers dreamed of a theater with high aesthetic standards, their immediate goal was to create a theater that would be, at the very least, a moderate improvement over *shund* in order to would improve the public's taste in theater.

⁵¹ From an interview with Peretz conducted in Berlin in 1903 while he toured Europe under the auspices of the New York daily *Tageblatt*. Nakhman Mayzel, ed., *Briv un redes fun Y.L. Perets* (New York: IKUF, 1944), 406.

What would the Yiddish art theater look like? To the detriment of their campaign, Peretz and his colleagues were never able to answer this question with any precision. Instead, they defined their goals with a wide range of oppositional adjectives: “better,” “more refined,” “purer,” “truer.” This suggestion was clear: there were only two kinds of Yiddish theater: the *kunst teater* and the *shund teater*, the Theater of Art and the Theater of Trash, and any intellectual with a brain could tell the difference. The battle lines were drawn, and there was to be no middle ground.

Of course, this idea of a diametrical opposition between two sharply diverging Yiddish theater traditions was not an accurate description by any means. The distinction between trashy entertainment and aesthetically pleasing art on the Yiddish stage was actually far more fluid. For in addition to the melodramas and operettas that the critics vehemently decried, the Warsaw *shund* theaters also staged plays by venerated “literary” Yiddish writers including Peretz, Sholem Asch, and Jacob Gordin as well as translations of European dramas by Molière, Gorky, and Octave Mirbeau, among others.⁵² Even the Muranov Theater, the *shundiest* theater of them all, staged Sholem Aleichem’s highly regarded literary drama *Scattered and Dispersed* along with several of Peretz’s one-acts, in what one historian called “a wink in the direction of literature.”⁵³ In fact, individual Yiddish actors and directors within the *shund* theaters were often interested in bringing a higher-status literary repertoire to their stages. The Yiddish theaters performing in Warsaw were thus more receptive to the influence of the new Yiddish theater criticism than the critics themselves were willing to admit. Yet while these strict categories of “art” versus “trash” did not fully capture the offerings of Warsaw’s Yiddish theaters, Peretz and his fellow critics were extremely successful in establishing a stringent *kunst/shund* polemic in the popular

⁵² Turkow-Grudberg, *Varshe dos vigele*, 15-16.

⁵³ Ibid., 15.

imagination, a polemic in which the very future of modern Yiddish culture was in direct conflict with the current offerings of the Yiddish stage.

In defining a stark opposition between the offerings of the current Yiddish theater (“trash”) and the dream of a better theater (“art”), Peretz and his colleagues set the stage for the emergence of a new Yiddish theater movement. By locating the current Yiddish theater firmly within the realm of the unaesthetic, these articles asked audiences to question the value of their own attendance at these theaters. Peretz hoped that this flood of criticism would leave spectators hungering for a new theater that would satisfy their theatrical appetites while also refining their aesthetic tastes, a theater that would make their favorite writers proud.

A Temple of Art

While the intelligentsia articulated what was wrong with the *shund* theater of the present with tremendous precision, they were less confident about the characteristics that would define their art theater of the future. The criteria for *kunst* articulated in these early Yiddish theater reviews were either negative (no more melodramas, the abandonment of preferential star treatment) or abstractly comparative (a “better” repertoire, a “more refined” audience, a “more educated” actor, a “more serious” rehearsal process). The art theater of Peretz and his followers was thus a theater perpetually engaged in a battle against its *shund* adversary. The survival of modern Jewish culture hinged upon the outcome of this battle. If the art theater won, modern Jewish culture would have the support of a mass Jewish audience capable of identifying authentic, refined, and appropriate literary and cultural forms. But if *shund* continued to dominate, the critics warned, the resulting corruption of mass taste would be catastrophic for Jewish intellectuals. A 1910 editorial by Mukdoyni was typical in its desperation:

We are on the cusp of a danger that this theater will cultivate a wild Jewish population that will have no ear for a beautiful word, no eye for colors and lines, no sense of what is ideal, no curiosity to think, no ability to speak respectably. And later, when we will try to speak to the folk from our hearts, we will encounter only wild laughter. They will laugh cynically at our pure words. [...] We must take a look around us, we must do something before it is too late.⁵⁴

With its potential to create an abyss between Jewish intellectuals and the masses, the *shund* theater represented a threat to the whole notion of a Yiddish culture led by writers and intellectuals. For Peretz, a self-proclaimed “elite aesthete,” this was a serious problem that required immediate attention.⁵⁵

With this in mind, Peretz’s Warsaw-based intellectual coterie articulated their demands for Yiddish theater reform as a project of great *national* significance. In an editorial entitled “What does our literature lack?”, Peretz argued that the very idea of a national Jewish culture was fundamentally opposed to the popular *shund* stage.

Why should Jewish talents play *Bar Kokhba* and *The Evil Woman*? [...] Art [*kunst*] is the soul of the folk, the *national personality*. Human art will first be created together with the masses: in the meantime it does not exist.⁵⁶

For Peretz, theater art represented the culminating stage in the development of modern Jewish culture and the ultimate site for the expressing Jewish peoplehood. The problem with *shund* was that it represented Jewishness inaccurately – and this, Peretz argued, was not only inappropriate, but threatening to the entire project of building a modern Jewish culture.

⁵⁴ A. Mukdoyni, “Fun yidishn teater,” *Der fraynd*, January 1, 1910, 4.

⁵⁵ Early in his career, Peretz wrote to Sholem Aleichem: “Your wish and goal...is to write for the sake of the audience that speaks jargon from jargon-land; I, for my part, write for my own pleasure, and if I take any reader into consideration, he is of the higher level of society [...].” Quoted in Marc Caplan, “Y.L. Peretz and the Politics of Yiddish” in *Czernowitz at 100: The First Yiddish Language Conference in Historical Perspective*, eds. Keith Ian Weiser and Joshua A. Fogel (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 77.

⁵⁶ Popular operettas of the period. Turkow-Grudberg, *Perets der veker*, 54. My emphasis.

The idea of the Yiddish theater as a woefully overlooked national institution took hold in Jewish intellectual circles. Mukdoyni's description of the Yiddish theater as a diasporic institution within Jewish society was typical of the criticism of the period:

The Yiddish theater has been forcefully separated from Jewish society. It wanders mournful and lonely in the dust, while an unsympathetic Jewish society does not even notice how the theater – *one of the most important national institutions* – becomes a travesty [*balagan*], while our best artists develop into unlucky acrobats and the theater audience turns into a coarse, dense animal.⁵⁷

Like Peretz, Mukdoyni considered the separation between literary Jewish culture and the Yiddish theater an artificial divide that needed to be eradicated in order for Yiddish culture to move forward. An anecdote recalled by the Yiddish actor Boaz Young illustrates the extent to which Peretz viewed improving the Yiddish theater as inextricable from his efforts to establish the language's legitimacy. When Young's actress wife Clara visited Warsaw for the first time, Peretz teased her: "You know, Madame Young, that when I hear you speaking onstage, I fall in love..." At this, Clara startled and looked bashfully at Peretz, who continued: "...with the Yiddish language."⁵⁸

In situating the Yiddish theater as a crucial site of Jewish cultural, linguistic, and national cohesion, Peretz drew upon established European ideas about the theater functioning as a kind of proto-national space. Russian-occupied Poland, dreaming of an independent Polish Republic, was especially dedicated to this notion of theatrical activity as a nation-building exercise. For Jewish intellectuals, the theater seemed an especially ideal arena for establishing the validity of modern Yiddish culture. Even the best Yiddish writers could scarcely hope to attract a non-Jewish readership to their work because they wrote in the Hebrew alphabet. But Yiddish theater,

⁵⁷ Dr. A. Mukdoyni, "Fun yidishn teater," *Fraynd*, 1 January 1910, 4.

⁵⁸ Zylbercweig, 3:2021. Boaz [pseud. for Boyez Yungvits] and Clara Young [pseud. for Khaye-Risiye Shpikolitser] were a husband-and-wife acting team who toured Europe and America in the first decades of the twentieth century.

as a spoken medium, had a distinct advantage in this regard. The Yiddish stage was thus the perfect vehicle for transmitting modern Jewish culture to a European audience. If the Yiddish theater could succeed with non-Jewish spectators, Peretz reasoned, the *legitimacy* of the Yiddish language, literature, and culture would be permanently assured.

In addition to establishing an art/trash polemic in theater criticism and strengthening a link between theater art and Jewish nationhood, Yiddish intellectuals also followed the lead of their European counterparts in envisioning the theater as a kind of holy space. Just as Polish poets and playwrights strategically compared their Polish national theaters to churches, Peretz and his compatriots followed their lead, transposing the “priestly mission” of the Polish theater into a Jewish context.⁵⁹ The new Yiddish theater would serve the Jewish community as a secular Temple of Art, replacing the social and cultural functions of the antiquated synagogue for modern Jewry. As Peretz proclaimed to fellow writers in 1907:

A theater is a synagogue where no imperfection, no individual lacking in merit may enter, and so one cannot yet be satisfied with the [current] Yiddish theater. But seeing the progress that the theater has made in the last year, one can take comfort and hope that, in time, the theater will develop to the highest level.⁶⁰

This metaphor of the Yiddish theater as a Jewish holy space was constantly invoked in the new theater criticism of Peretz and his colleagues. In 1907, Peretz described one *shund* production as a dishonored Temple from which the divine presence (*shekhinah*) had withdrawn in sorrow. He pleaded with readers to abandon the *shund* theater and to “come into our ‘Temple’, as it were, of

⁵⁹ Steinlauf, “Fear of Purim,” 46-47. “Priestly mission” is from an 1875 Polish poem about a new Polish theater in Poznań: “And may this holy inheritance be / a national pantheon of virtue, / This edifice, this priestly mission / Today is blessed by the genius of Polish speech.” As Steinlauf explains, these metaphors of theater-as-holy-space were also extremely common in Polish literature in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

⁶⁰ Turkow-Grudberg, *Perets der veker*, 29. The speech was in honor of Avrom-Yankev Kaminski’s birthday, and commemorated the achievements of his Literary Troupe, which I discuss at length in the second half of this chapter.

– art!!!”⁶¹ This vision of the Yiddish theater as a secular religion of art ultimately became the dominant metaphor invoked by the Vilna Troupe and the entire Yiddish art theater movement.

In the aftermath of the chaotic upheavals of 1905, Peretz and his newly established circle of theater critics were certain that their project to reform the Yiddish theater was already well underway. Virtually overnight, they had managed to establish their theater criticism as a central component of Warsaw’s thriving Yiddish press. Writers like Peretz, Mukdoyni, Dinezon, and Vayter could be confident that their theater criticism was reaching a growing community of readers who might ultimately form the audience base necessary to support an active Yiddish art theater. By 1907, the campaign had succeeded in shaping the terms of a robust debate over the future of the Yiddish theater. As this debate reached a fever pitch, the emergence of a Yiddish art theater seemed right on the horizon. With high hopes, Peretz and his colleagues launched the second phase of their campaign for a better theater: a plan to launch the first Yiddish art theater company. They had already succeeded in positioning the Yiddish theater as *the* most important element of modern Yiddish culture. With the most influential figure in Jewish Warsaw at their helm, how could they possibly fail?

PART TWO: A SERIES OF EXTRAORDINARY FAILURES

Peretz’s Temptation

In May of 1905, a Yiddish director named Avrom-Yankev Kaminski brought his fledgling company to the Winter Garden Theater on the outskirts of Warsaw. At the time, Kaminski’s troupe consisted of his immediate family, co-founder Avrom (Misha) Fishzon and his family, another director, Mark Arnshteyn, and twenty actors drawn from Lodz and the

⁶¹ Steinlauf, “Fear of Purim,” 50.

surrounding areas.⁶² Kaminski was a budding director who, together with his talented actress wife Esther Rokhl Kaminska, had been following the theater debates in the Yiddish press with interest and decided that they would single-handedly bring literary drama to the Yiddish stage. Perhaps surprisingly, they joined forces in this enterprise with Fishzon, a director primarily known for his elaborate stagings of popular operettas and melodramas – the very sort of productions that Peretz and his colleagues attacked in their editorials.⁶³ In coming together as partners, the Kaminskis and Fishzon hoped that their productions would bridge the gap between the “literary” theater advocated by intellectuals and the *shund* theater beloved by the masses.

By the time the Kaminski-Fishzon Troupe arrived in Warsaw, they had been traveling throughout the Russian Empire for several months, performing a limited repertoire of about a dozen plays. These plays were disproportionately written by the turn-of-the-century American Yiddish drama reformer Jacob Gordin (1853-1909), with a few additional plays by other literary writers including Sholem Aleichem, Mark Arnshteyn, a recently published one-act by Peretz, and a Yiddish translation of a Gorky drama.⁶⁴ While Peretz and his colleagues were developing their theories of a Yiddish art theater in the pages of Warsaw’s newspapers, the Kaminski-Fishzon Troupe was actively trying to bring “better” theater to audiences accustomed to melodrama, farce, and flashy over-the-top spectacles in one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods. Their efforts did not last long. After scarcely a year in Warsaw, having achieved neither critical nor financial success, the company fell apart and Kaminski and his family returned to Lodz.

⁶² Fishzon was a pseudonym for Moyshe Khosidman. Zylbercweig, 6:5259-5260. For a detailed biography and analysis of Mark Arnshteyn’s career see Steinlauf, “Polish-Jewish Theater.”

⁶³ One of Fishzon’s greatest successes was his production of *Khinke Pinke* in Lemberg in 1905. To Peretz and his colleagues, this over-the-top play so epitomized what they thought was wrong with *shund* that the phrase “khinke pinke” became a synonym for *shund* in their editorials. On Misha Fishzon, see Zylbercweig, 4:3282-3294.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 5260. The Peretz drama staged by the Kaminski-Fishzon Troupe in 1905 was *Shvester* [*Sisters*], a one-act that was originally published in Hebrew in 1904 then translated into Yiddish by the author.

While the Kaminski-Fishzon Troupe failed to attract the audience they had hoped for, they succeeded in attracting Peretz's attention. For in addition to writing and publishing dozens of theater essays during this period, Peretz was also hard at work on writing new dramas of his own. When he learned about the activities of the Kaminski-Fishzon Troupe in 1905, he was just putting the finishing touches on *Der nisoyen* [*The Temptation*], a Yiddish reworking of his Hebrew play *Khurban beit tsadik* [*The Ruin of the Sage's House*] (1903), which would later become famous under the title *Di goldene keyt* [*The Golden Chain*] (1907).

To colleagues, Peretz began to confide that he wished to see his plays performed. Unlike his previous closet dramas, then, *Temptation* was explicitly written with the goal of a stage production in mind. Peretz began to actively search for artists who could help him carry out his vision. When friends and colleagues wondered aloud how he could stand to attend the popular melodramas of the *shund* theaters, Peretz answered that he was interested in the "talent behind the actors."⁶⁵ Between their nascent skill and his literary vision, perhaps a Yiddish art theater would emerge

As his anti-*shund* reviews and editorials began to draw a larger and larger readership, Peretz hoped that an artistic staging of *The Temptation* would once and for all prove the merits of Yiddish theater before a mass audience primed by his criticism. Between Kaminski's directorial ambitions and Fishzon's eye for spectacle, the Kaminski-Fishzon Troupe seemed the perfect vehicle for Peretz's goal. If an artistic staging of a literary drama like *Temptation* could succeed in pleasing both fellow intellectuals and the *shund*-going public, it would undermine the *shundists'* defense that they could not help but cater to what its spectators desired. An art theater production that attracted the masses would also shake the financial foundations of the *shund* theater by threatening its audience base. If it succeeded, a Kaminski-Fishzon production of

⁶⁵ Zylbercweig, 3:1911.

Temptation had the potential to bring about the defeat of the *shund* theater and to introduce the vocabulary of the new theater criticism (“better theater,” “refined theater,” “literary drama”) directly onto the popular Yiddish stage.

Moreover, Peretz began to dream that a high art production of *Temptation* could perhaps bring the reformed Yiddish theater to the attention of non-Jewish audiences. Peretz Hirschbein, a young playwright and a disciple of his who visited Warsaw in 1906, recalled that Peretz took every opportunity to stress “the importance of creating our own theater that would *even be a little bit successful in the non-Jewish theater*.”⁶⁶ Peretz may well have been inspired by news of the Moscow Art Theater’s success with its first European tour in early 1906, which established the international reputation of Stanislavsky and his company. This first tour of the Moscow Art Theater was widely covered in the European press, whose wildly enthusiastic reviews were in turn translated and reprinted in Warsaw’s Yiddish newspapers. As he read how German theater critics proclaimed, “we know the Russians are a hundred years behind politically, but dear God how far they are ahead artistically,” we can imagine Peretz wondering if a Yiddish theater company with ambitious artistic goals might be able to elicit similar sentiments from Gentile theatergoers.⁶⁷ A successful Yiddish production modeled on the performances of the Moscow Art Theater had the potential to permanently secure the Yiddish theater a place among the great European dramatic traditions that Peretz so admired.

When Kaminski returned to Warsaw at the beginning of 1906, Peretz was ready to set his plan into motion.⁶⁸ He went personally to meet with the directors at the Winter Garden Theater,

⁶⁶ Zylbercweig, 3:1911.

⁶⁷ Quoted in a letter from Stanislavsky to Vladimir Alekseev, February - March 1906, Berlin. Jean Benedetti, *The Moscow Art Theatre Letters* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 238.

⁶⁸ There is some disagreement among critics and historians as to whether or not Kaminski was actually involved with the *Temptation* production. Zylbercweig’s *Lexicon of the Yiddish Theater* names Fishzon as the sole director of

armed with a handwritten copy of the latest version of his *Temptation*.⁶⁹ When Kaminski and Fishzon agreed to stage the play, Peretz became involved in virtually every aspect of the production. Not only did he insist on casting the show himself, but he also made a point of attending every rehearsal. At times, the famous Yiddish writer even took over from the directors. Aron Albek, a fellow Yiddish writer and Peretz's secretary, described the rehearsal process:

Peretz himself came to every rehearsal. Forgetting that he had worked in the Jewish community center until 3 PM, he used to run straight to his work at the theater at 9 Khmielna Street in the afternoons. I was present as Peretz's personal secretary at several rehearsals, and I had the opportunity to observe how much effort, energy, and zeal Peretz dedicated to the drama. He did not tire of repeating a phrase even ten times so that the artist would pick up the correct tone of the Rabbi [...] or how the Rabbi struggles with his inner conflict which cause him to doubt...⁷⁰

While Fishzon and Kaminski were ostensibly the stage directors of *Temptation*, Albek's anecdotal recollection suggests that Peretz's involvement with the production extended far beyond his official role as playwright and dramatic advisor. Instead, Peretz was personally involved in many aspects of the production that would ordinarily fall within the director's purview: for instance, coaching actors on their interpretation of specific lines.

Finally, after months of rehearsals, *The Temptation* opened on April 26, 1906 in Warsaw's Winter Garden Theater. On opening night, a packed house filled the auditorium; among the spectators were nearly all of Warsaw's most prominent Yiddish writers and Jewish intellectuals.

Albek described the atmosphere in the theater before the curtain rose: "The entire audience was

Temptation (Leksikon, "Fishzon," 3284). Similarly, Elinor Rubel claims that Fishzon and Kaminski broke off their partnership prior to the production. See Rubel, "Fishzon's Theater and the Premiere of Peretz's *Nisojen* (*Temptation*) in Warsaw (1906)" in *Teatr żydowski w Polsce: materiały z międzynarodowej konferencji naukowej, Warszawa, 18-21 października 1993 roku*, eds. Anna Kuligowska-Korzeniewska and Małgorzata Leyko (Łódź: Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1998), 113-126. Other sources, however, suggest that Kaminski did in fact work on the production. Shmuel Niger wrote of Kaminski's involvement in his biography of Peretz. Peretz himself also wrote of Kaminski's involvement in the *Temptation* production in a letter to Kaminski dated January 30, 1907 (reprinted in Mayzel, *Briv un redes fun Y.L. Perets*, 248). Since Peretz's lead biographer and Peretz himself ascribe a directorial role to Kaminski, I have chosen to follow their lead and include Kaminski as a member of the *Temptation* team.

⁶⁹ Zylbercweig, 3:1912.

⁷⁰ Aron Albek, "Zikhroyes vegn Y.L. Peretz," *Shtern* 16.10 (October 1940): 35.

in an elevated mood. We felt something, felt that a turning point in the Yiddish repertoire had been reached, which the audience was ready for. In the end, however, the whole thing... was a disaster.”⁷¹

When the curtain finally rose, the audience was appalled. Even the best actors in the troupe struggled to embody Peretz’s lofty and abstract characters. An unattractive set design and the poverty of the theater building itself added to the audience’s disappointment. The next day’s reviews were unsparing in their criticism. Writer Yente Serdatski was disgusted by the physical poverty of the production, which stood in sharp contrast to the artistic triumph that Peretz had promised. “We sat on simple wooden benches. The cheaper tickets were terribly far from the stage and you could not hear a word. There was hardly any lighting or heat. This poverty had an effect on the actors, and they wandered about the stage as if they were in an alien world.”⁷² The only lively moment in the entire production, wrote Serdatski, was during the entr’acte, when Peretz walked around the theater greeting friends. Literary critic Bal-Makhshoves [pseud. for Isidor Eliashev] blamed Peretz’s shoddy playwriting for the unappealing aesthetics of the production as a whole:

The story with the love affair and thus the entire tragedy [...] is a bit old-fashioned, it stinks of the *Haskalah* [Jewish Enlightenment] era [...] Nevertheless, the production would have still made a significant impression if the first act had provided that above-mentioned [festive] feeling. Unfortunately, however, nothing from all of Peretz’s dreams came out in the production. There was no sky, no meadow, no river, no strength of the Hasidim, no body and no soul. The *sukkah* was an ugly *sukkah*, wall upon wall without a separation. The Rebbe Mendl seemed like a magician in a Purim play, and the Hasidism around him like clowns. There was no emotion to consider. And so far as the poetic crept in, it was nothing more than the kind of cheap effects that hold no interest for the educated spectator. Peretz gave his *Temptation* the subtitle “a drama.” This is a false title. We see very little that befits a drama here.⁷³

⁷¹ Albek, 35.

⁷² Zylbercweig, 3:1916.

⁷³ Bal-Makhshoves, “Der nisoyen: drame in fir aktn fun Y.L. Perets,” *Dos yudishe folk* 1.1 (May 15, 1906): 21.

For Bal-Makhshoves and other critics of the production, *The Temptation*'s greatest crime was its failure to deliver on Peretz's promise to liberate the Yiddish stage from the yoke of *shund*. Instead, the production seemed overly beholden to exactly what Peretz had promised to change: scenes, sets, and characters that bore no relation to their real-life counterparts; a lack of emotional authenticity; an over-exaggeration of the characters which evoked the low-culture sensibility of the circus and the Purim play; and the use of cheap effects to manipulate the audience. Rather than supplying the Yiddish theater with a new model for theatrical artistry, the critics charged, Peretz and the troupe had simply presented a flawed drama with literary pretensions clothed in the garb of the two genres most associated with lowbrow Yiddish culture: the *Purimshpil* and the *shund* melodrama.⁷⁴

Indeed, the play itself was largely the problem. Reading *The Temptation*, what is most striking is the utter lack of dramatic tension.⁷⁵ The first act (which was later removed in Peretz's final version of this play, *The Golden Chain*) opens with a group of Hasidic Jews reading and praying in the synagogue. Their language as they discuss the Torah portion of the week and matters of Jewish law is lofty and poetic, but as a stage drama, the scene is completely flat. The Hasidim drone on and on about religious and philosophical matters in exceedingly abstract terms, other worshippers recite psalms, and virtually nothing happens. There are moments of great theatrical writing scattered throughout the text, particularly in the third act when Yonatan,

⁷⁴ *Purimshpiln* (Purim plays) were traditionally associated with low culture, but recent scholarly appraisals have demonstrated how many of these plays were in fact quite sophisticated. See Ahuva Belkin, "The 'Low' Culture of the Purimshpil" in Berkowitz, *Yiddish Theatre: New Approaches*, 29-43.

⁷⁵ *The Temptation* was never published and I have not been able to locate a manuscript of the version that was produced in Warsaw. My analysis of *Temptation* is thus based on its most immediate antecedent, the Hebrew-language version *Khurban beit tsadik* [*The Ruin of the Sage's House*], which was published serially in *Hashiloakh* between May 1903 and December 1903. By all accounts, Peretz's Yiddish *Temptation* was a direct translation of the Hebrew version with a few major modifications, including the addition of a fourth act. Still, the first three acts roughly correspond to the play that Peretz staged in 1906. Y.L. Peretz, *Khurban beit tsadik*, *Hashiloakh* 11 (May 1903, June 1903) and 12 (December 1903): 471-474; 566-570; and 529-543.

the secularist renegade son of a devout Hasidic father, is put on trial by local religious leaders and begs his dead father and God for forgiveness (“I am the last link in the chain. I am the last one here.”)⁷⁶ God and the assembled masses remain silent in spite of his exhortations, and the play ends ambiguously without the audience knowing for certain if Yonatan was actually excommunicated. But the first two acts are far more atmospheric than theatrical. Peretz may have been a great Yiddish poet, essayist, critic, and storyteller, but he was not yet a competent dramatist.

Most of *Temptation*’s critics blamed Peretz and excused the actors for their role in the *Temptation* debacle. Typical was Bal-Makhshoves’ assertion that the actors “did not perform Peretz’s play well, [because] they *could not* perform it well.”⁷⁷ Dr. Gershon Levin echoed Bal-Makhshoves’ appraisal in his analysis of the three reasons why *Temptation* flopped:

The drama failed. First, because it had no dramatic action in it. Many of the scenes were utterly excessive, since the heroes that roamed about the stage had nothing to do and were occupied only with speaking. Secondly, the actors performed badly and they *did not understand the concept of the play at all*. Thirdly, one felt as if the play had been scrawled down in haste.⁷⁸

For Levin, the actors, unschooled in their craft and drawn primarily from the *shund* stage, did not have the capacity to understand what was expected of them and thus could not be blamed for their failings. It was Peretz alone who was at fault for failing to bring his artistic vision to fruition. If *Temptation* had achieved anything at all, argued the critics, its only success was in tempting those who had previously boycotted the Yiddish theater to attend. Even the most negative reviews commented on Peretz’s success in attracting a more intellectual audience to the

⁷⁶ Peretz, *Khurban*, 542.

⁷⁷ Bal-Makhshoves, “Der nisoyen,” 22.

⁷⁸ Zylbercweig, 1:1916.

Yiddish stage. Indeed, many of the spectators were known for their staunch disapproval of the Yiddish theater and several had never before attended a production.

While the critics blamed Peretz's lack of dramatic and directorial skills for the failure of *The Temptation*, the famous writer responded in turn by accusing the actors of sabotaging his play. He demanded that the company's star actress, Esther Rokhl Kaminska, return his manuscript and cease performances immediately. Kaminska protested that they could perhaps rehearse *Temptation* for a few more weeks and try again, but Peretz thundered that he would never permit them to perform any of his dramas again – not even for the scheduled second night show.⁷⁹ He was certain that *Temptation* had failed because the actors did not properly understand him or his work. It was characteristic of the production, raged Peretz, that Kaminski had to write out Misha Fishzon's part in Russian letters because he could not read the Yiddish alphabet.⁸⁰ He swore that he would never work with actors so unschooled in Yiddish literature again. "It was my play," he told friends, "but they ruined it."⁸¹ To the public, he tried to minimize his connection with the production as much as possible by downplaying his collaborative role during the rehearsal process. In truth, Peretz was as much to blame for the production's failure as the actors and directors, and his reaction to the flop was symptomatic of his inability to adequately connect with theater artists throughout his campaign.

Yet in spite of Peretz's disappointment, the *Temptation* production demonstrated conclusively that there was indeed an audience – and a large one at that – interested in a Yiddish art theater. Peretz's vision of an intellectual theater revolution spoke to a deeply held desire

⁷⁹ The feeling among the actors in the troupe was generally that Peretz ought to write a new version of the play that would correct its faults. With a new draft of the play, they felt that they could rehearse and present a production that would be better received. See Viera Zaslavskaya Fishzon's remarks in Zylbercweig, 3:1917.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 1913.

⁸¹ Ibid., 1917.

among Jewish writers and their readers. The failure of *Temptation* may have mortified Peretz, but it did not in any way diminish his resolve to continue advocating for a “better” Yiddish theater to replace *shund*. At the same time as he withdrew his play and broke off all contact with the Fishzon-Kaminski actors, Peretz reached out to younger intellectuals who had practical stage experience, among them the amateur theater enthusiast and writer Peretz Hirschbein. Peretz convinced Hirschbein to form his own Yiddish art theater company under his watchful guidance, only to find that the same humiliating scene at the *Temptation* premiere would repeat itself again and again.

Second Failure: The Hirschbein Troupe (1908 – 1910)

Unlike most Yiddish writers of his generation, Peretz Hirschbein (1880–1948) was born and raised among farmers in the countryside. He received a thorough religious education until the age of fourteen and, for a time, dreamed of becoming a rabbi. Five years later, a newly secularized Hirschbein turned his back on his religious upbringing and moved to Vilna, where he earned a living teaching Hebrew and Jewish history. He made his literary debut in 1901 with the publication of a poem in the Hebrew-language literary periodical *Hador*. It was not long before he turned to writing Hebrew dramas. In 1905, Hirschbein published *Miriam*, a naturalistic drama about a destitute young woman forced into prostitution after being jilted by her arrogant rich lover. The play was originally written in Hebrew, but Hirschbein published his own Yiddish translation of it one year later, establishing a writing pattern that he would continue to follow for the next several years in which Hebrew originals always preceded Yiddish translations.⁸² Though the first professional Hebrew theater company was not established until 1917, over forty years

⁸² Hirschbein’s Yiddish translation of *Miriam* was published in the New York paper *Der idisher kempfer* in 1906. Hirschbein later re-titled the play *Barg arop (Downfall)* for inclusion in the first edition of his collected dramas (New York: Literarish-Dramatishe Fareynen in Amerike, 1916). A later edition of Hirschbein’s dramas (Vilna: B. Klezkin, 1923) reprinted the play under its original title.

after the founding of the first professional Yiddish theater in 1876, Hirschbein, like most Jewish writers of the period, initially viewed the Yiddish theater as an anti-intellectual medium unfit for literary drama.⁸³ As was common among turn-of-the-century Jewish intellectuals, Hirschbein was an avid attendee of the Russian theater, and he cited his experiences attending Russian productions as the primary inspiration for his playwriting career:

The [Russian] language sounded clear and musical. Sitting in the theater, I learned from the actors how to speak Russian beautifully. Yiddish troupes often traveled to Vilna, and when I went to see what they performed, going with the same eagerness with which I went to the Russian theater, I emerged ashamed, spiritually bereft [...] I could not for the life of me understand how, writing for the stage, one could move so far from artistic and living truth. I therefore wrote my ultra-realistic drama *Miriam* not in Yiddish, as such subject matter demanded, but in Hebrew.⁸⁴

And so Hirschbein began to write his plays in Hebrew, always with this vision of the Russian “literary stage” firmly in mind.

Feeling isolated in the comparatively small literary community of Vilna, Hirschbein traveled to Warsaw hoping to encounter like-minded writers in the cultural center of Jewish Eastern Europe. Like most aspiring Yiddish writers, Hirschbein went straight to Peretz’s house upon his arrival, but in his anxiety over meeting the great writer he forgot to bring along a single sample of his work. Peretz, however, was intrigued by the young writer’s interest in the theater and hired a driver to take Hirschbein home to retrieve his manuscripts.⁸⁵ From this inauspicious first meeting emerged a mentorship that would culminate in the Hirschbein Troupe. After reading *Miriam*, Peretz strongly encouraged Hirschbein to continue writing plays. “We lack

⁸³ The Habima was founded in 1917 and gave its first premiere in 1918. However, isolated amateur Hebrew theatre troupes existed as early as the late 19th century. See the section on modern Hebrew drama (712-718) in Eisig Silberschlag, “Hebrew Literature, Modern” in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Second Edition, Vol. 8 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007): 684-738.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Joel Berkowitz and Jeremy Dauber, foreword to *Landmark Yiddish Plays: A Critical Anthology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 55.

⁸⁵ See Hirschbein’s description of the encounter in his memoirs. Hirschbein, *In gang*, 29-35.

dramatists,” he told the younger writer, “so I expect a lot from you.”⁸⁶ He then suggested that Hirschbein look to the Belgian symbolist playwright Maurice Maeterlinck for inspiration. The two writers began to take extended walks together where Peretz discussed symbolist drama with Hirschbein at length, soliciting the younger writer’s input on *Di goldene keyt* (*The Golden Chain*), a heavily revised version of *Temptation*.⁸⁷ Peretz also introduced Hirschbein to other Yiddish dramatists, including Jacob Dinezon and Sholem Asch. Hirschbein was surprised and impressed to learn that Sholem Asch had written several serious dramas in Yiddish.

Though Peretz encouraged him to stay in Warsaw, Hirschbein instead returned to Vilna and published *Miriam* in installments in a local literary journal. Yet his encounter with the famous author had transformed Hirschbein’s perspective on his own writing. “I returned to Vilna matured and older,” he later described, “Though I had only been searching for my future in Warsaw a few weeks, I returned to Vilna and hardly recognized the streets.”⁸⁸

Hirschbein began to experiment with two new literary approaches: first, symbolist dramas modeled on Maeterlinck, as Peretz had suggested; and soon, writing in Yiddish, encouraged by the example of Sholem Asch. His last Hebrew drama, *Olamot bodedim* (*Lonely Worlds*, 1905), bore a strong resemblance to Maeterlinck’s *Les Aveugles* (*The Blind*, 1890), which had been translated into Hebrew that same year.⁸⁹ In 1906, Hirschbein published his first original Yiddish drama *Af yener zayt taykh* (*On the Other Side of the River*). He brought these plays and others to publishers in Vilna, expecting a warm reception. Instead, the editors rejected Hirschbein’s Yiddish plays on the grounds that they were too literary. “It’s too refined,” argued

⁸⁶ Hirschbein, *In gang*, 34.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸⁹ Silberschlag, 718.

one editor after reading Hirschbein's symbolist one-act *Kvorim blumen* (*Cemetery Flowers*, 1906). "The reader won't understand. Find another place to publish it."⁹⁰

Disappointed with his prospects in Vilna, Hirschbein returned to Warsaw for a short time, where Peretz once again tried unsuccessfully to convince him to stay and found an art theater company. By 1907, Warsaw's literary circles were abuzz with the Yiddish theater frenzy sweeping Eastern Europe. One of Peretz's protégés, a young Yiddish director named Dovid Herman, had just enrolled in the local Polish drama school with Peretz's blessing, hoping to learn from accomplished Polish theater practitioners and apply these lessons to the Yiddish theater. Staged readings organized by Peretz and the members of his theater circle were being held nightly in the homes of prominent Warsaw literati. By the time Hirschbein met with Peretz, the latter had largely recovered from his disappointment with the *Temptation* production and had begun to work in the theater again, collaborating this time with *amateur* Yiddish theater artists and directors like Herman and Mark Arnshteyn to organize small-scale productions around the city.⁹¹ At the same time, a group of young Warsaw Yiddish playwrights began to gather independently to discuss Yiddish theater reform and they invited Hirschbein to join them. Warsaw in 1907 was thus a particularly welcoming environment for a young Yiddish playwright seeking to make his mark. At the time, however, Hirschbein was more interested in working for the famous German and Russian theaters that he idolized. He left Warsaw and, for a time, remained an itinerant playwright, traveling from Berlin to St. Petersburg and working briefly with several European theater companies. This was by no means an unusual move for a Yiddish

⁹⁰ Hirschbein, *In gang*, 105.

⁹¹ Dovid Herman's amateur Drama Studio performed Peretz's one acts *S'brent* and *Shvester*, Sholem Aleichem's *Mazl tov*, and Sholem Asch's *Mitn shtrom*, all with Peretz's involvement and oversight, beginning in the summer of 1906 and culminating in several well-received productions in 1907. See Peretz's letter dated January 30, 1907 to Kaminski in Mayzel, *Briv un redes fun Y.L. Perets*, 248.

writer during this period, but unlike many of his colleagues, Hirschbein struggled to find work on the European stage. Finally, in the spring of 1908, he returned to Eastern Europe and took up residence in Odessa.⁹²

Odessa was hardly a natural choice for a budding Yiddish playwright. To begin with, there were no professional Yiddish writers in Odessa, a city heavily steeped in Russian and, to a lesser extent, Hebrew culture.⁹³ All of Odessa's Jewish writers had secondary occupations: S.Y. Abramovitch (Mendele) was the director of a Talmud Torah school, Chaim Nakhman Bialik worked as a printer, and Berl Shafir always stank of Turkish tobacco from his day job as a cigarette manufacturer.⁹⁴ Yet Odessa was also a Jewish community founded by adventurers that never quite lost its frontier-town feel. It had "its own unique brand of modern Jewish culture," and was known as a "locus of cultural experimentation."⁹⁵ In Odessa, Hirschbein discovered Yiddish cultural start-ups more creative and experimental than their more established counterparts in Warsaw.

Hirschbein struck up a relationship with Shafir, a local Yiddish poet and fellow theater enthusiast. Having heard about Hirschbein's literary promise from Peretz, Shafir suggested that the two of them found a Yiddish theater company dedicated to performing only literary dramas. "You are the only one who can do this," Shafir told Hirschbein, "I'll show you just how easy it

⁹² Hirschbein's trip to Odessa was initially motivated by his desire to see a Russian-language production of his *Af yener zayt taykh* in the fall of 1908. This production was directed by the artistic director of the Odessa Theater.

⁹³ Of course, Hirschbein – a Hebrew writer first – could also interact with Odessa's Hebrew literary milieu, but at this point in his career, he was writing exclusively in Yiddish.

⁹⁴ Peretz Hirschbein, "In kamf far a besern teater." *Literarishe bleter*, 24 October 1930, 800.

⁹⁵ Dan Miron, foreword to *Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler: Fishke the Lame and Benjamin the Third* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), xxii-xxiii.

will come to you in Odessa. Only in Odessa!”⁹⁶ This time, Hirschbein agreed. Outside of Warsaw, he saw an opening to develop a Yiddish theater troupe without the constant oversight of the capital’s Jewish intellectual establishment. Even Peretz concurred with his protégé’s decision, in spite of his desire to have an artistic Yiddish theater troupe based in Warsaw. In Odessa, the company would have true autonomy, unencumbered by the demands and desires of the mainstream literary community. With Peretz’s blessing, Hirschbein and Shafir began to plan for the founding of their troupe in the fall of 1908.

Just a few weeks earlier, the movement to develop a thriving Yiddish national culture had hit its apex with the Czernowitz conference (August 30 – September 4, 1908). Convened by a group of self-styled nationalist theoreticians and prominent literary figures from across Jewish Eastern Europe, the Czernowitz conference sought to determine the position of Yiddish language and culture in modern Jewish life.⁹⁷ The conference attracted dozens of leading Yiddish-speaking writers, intellectuals, and institutional leaders – among them Peretz, who delivered the opening keynote address and dominated the entire event. Peretz’s speech called for the “liberation” of a Yiddish language and culture that was the most authentic representation of Jewish national creativity. “Jews are one people whose language is Yiddish.” Peretz proclaimed. “In this language we wish to gather our treasure, create our culture, further stimulate our spirit, and unite ourselves culturally in all lands and in all times.”⁹⁸ One of the many cultural institutions envisioned by Peretz in his speech was a national Yiddish theater that would likewise

⁹⁶ Hirschbein, “In kamf,” 801.

⁹⁷ The Czernowitz Conference was convened during a period in which European nationalists were also organizing their own linguistic conferences. See Joshua Fishman, “Czernowitz Conference” in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, Gershon David Hundert, ed., vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 384-385.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Marie Schumacher-Brunhes, “Peretz’s Commitment to Yiddish in Czernowitz: A National Caprice?” in Weiser and Fogel, 48. Schumacher-Brunhes’ article (45-53) provides a useful overview of the evolution of Peretz’s commitment to Yiddish as the language of Jewish national culture, culminating in his Czernowitz address.

unite modern European Jewry – a reference that could not have escaped the attention of Hirschbein and other Yiddish theater enthusiasts. Predictably, the Czernowitz conference received extensive coverage in the Yiddish press, and Peretz’s opening plea for Yiddish cultural autonomy resounded throughout the Jewish world. While most delegates hesitated to declare Yiddish *the* national Jewish language (as opposed to Hebrew), the contentious debates over the role of Yiddish in Jewish culture had a profound symbolic effect, particularly on impressionable young writers at the start of their careers. Thus at the very same moment that Hirschbein was convening his theater company, the Yiddish world was abuzz with discussion about establishing Yiddish cultural institutions that would serve as national organs in Jewish life – including a national Yiddish theater.

Other recent developments in the Yiddish theater world may have also influenced Hirschbein as he prepared to establish his company. Mark Arnshteyn, another young theater enthusiast, had recently founded the Literarishe Trupe (“literary troupe”) with a membership drawn primarily from Esther-Rokhl Kaminska’s company. In 1908, Arnshteyn’s Literarishe Trupe began touring Eastern Europe to widespread acclaim in the Yiddish and Russian press.⁹⁹ The founding of this theater company devoted to producing a literary Yiddish repertoire aroused tremendous hope among Jewish intellectuals interested in the theater, though Peretz and his circle, recalling the limitations of these same actors in *Temptation*, were more pessimistic about the Literary Troupe’s prospects. Indeed, the company did not survive long. They had a small repertoire, consisting of fewer than ten plays, most of which were authored by a single

⁹⁹ Steinlauf, “Polish-Jewish Theater,” 158. Steinlauf’s dissertation is the most comprehensive source available on Mark Arnshteyn, and also considers the Literarishe Trupe in detail. The Literarishe Trupe disintegrated when Arnshteyn left the company in 1909.

playwright: Jacob Gordin.¹⁰⁰ Audience members saw these plays once and did not return. The actors, meanwhile, vehemently disagreed about which plays qualified as “literary” enough to add to their repertoire. Indeed, there were few dramas from which to choose. With audiences dwindling in Warsaw, the Literary Troupe toured the Polish “provinces” – the cities and towns with large Jewish populations outside of Warsaw: Bialystok, Grodno, Riga, Vilna, Vitebsk – even all the way to St. Petersburg. Perhaps Hirschbein may have seen them perform in Odessa, or en route to Warsaw on one of his visits. The excitement among Jewish intellectuals about the Literary Troupe, combined with their disappointment about its narrow repertoire, likely made a strong impression on Hirschbein as he planned for a company of his own.

Indeed, by 1908 the debates over the future of the theater in the Yiddish press had reached a fever pitch. In *Fraynd* in January 1908, a critic writing under the pseudonym A. Yarkhai argued that Jews must found a new “masterpiece theater” company in order to permanently alter the place of Yiddish theater in Jewish life. The financial difficulty could be offset by a subscription system, Yarkhai suggested, in which Warsaw Jews would be encouraged to pre-order tickets to pay for the start-up costs of forming a new troupe. The only thing missing was the right person for the job, “an energetic person, who would feel and understand the tremendous importance of this task.”¹⁰¹ *Fraynd*’s editors subsequently published the dozens of letters they received in response to this article. One letter-writer weighed in that the success of a Yiddish art theater depended on the Jewish intelligentsia and the Yiddish press working together to support actors’ efforts to improve their craft: “Jewish writers, Jewish intellectuals, Jewish

¹⁰⁰ Mukdoyni (“Zikhroynes,” 343) wrote that the Literary Troupe’s repertoire was limited to the following: six Gordin plays, Pinski’s *Di muter* and Libin’s *Gebrokhene hertser*. Steinlauf (“Polish-Jewish Theater,” 158) lists a slightly expanded repertoire that included plays by Sholem Aleichem, Arnshteyn himself, and a new Yiddish translation of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*.

¹⁰¹ A. Yarkhai, “Etlekhe verter vegn yudishn teater,” *Der fraynd*, 10 January 1908, 1.

newspapers, help the Yiddish actors – and the Yiddish art theater will exist!”¹⁰² Judging from the enthusiastic press, there was no question that Hirschbein and Shafir’s new theater would have an audience base.

But Hirschbein did not start his company where this audience was certain to be found in Warsaw; he made the bold choice to build his theater in Odessa instead. In 1908, Odessa was a small enough city to have only one Yiddish theater company – a *shund* group that played only the worst from the melodramatic Yiddish repertoire. The dominance of abject *shund* in Odessa was a tremendous frustration for local theater enthusiasts. Odessa boasted a prestigious Russian drama school with a large proportion of Jewish students. Caught between the *shund* Yiddish stage and the anti-Semitic atmosphere that pervaded the Russian theater, these students were delighted to have an alternative and signed on to Hirschbein’s project. At the time of its founding, the company consisted of a mixture of amateur Odessa theater aficionados (Bashina and Kohn), students from the Russian drama school (Leah Noemi, Sonia Orlovska, Rosenvaser, Ashin, and Tanski), and professional actors in self-imposed exile from the Yiddish *shund* stage (Wolf Zilberberg, Betty Dalska, Jacob Ben-Ami, Lazar Freed, and Dovid Fakhler). All of the actors in the troupe were quite young: few were past their twenties and none were over forty. An ensemble atmosphere prevailed: every actor was to be equal in the distribution of roles and no actor was to be billed above the others, save for their founder. The Hirschbein Troupe never declared a single director; instead, they alternated between relying on guest directors and directing many of their productions collaboratively.¹⁰³ This was a far cry from the “star system” that typically dominated the Yiddish stage, in which leading actors tended to exert near-complete

¹⁰² Volf Vaysblat, “Vegn a yidishn kinstlerishn teater,” *Der fraynd*, 13 April 1908, 3.

¹⁰³ Mendl Elkin, untitled essay on the Hirschbein Troupe. Mendl Elkin Papers (RG 453), Folder 34, 8, YIVO. At one point, the Troupe invited Dovid Herman to become their permanent director, but he refused, preferring to work independently instead.

control over the entire production. Finally, and most significantly, the Hirschbein Troupe carefully developed a repertoire of plays by young writers who were supported by the literary establishment. Almost immediately, the company became known around Odessa as “the literary theater.”¹⁰⁴ Indeed, the Hirschbein Troupe’s primary goal was not artistic or aesthetic but *literary*: to encourage people to become readers of good Yiddish literature. At the end of his life, Hirschbein proudly recalled that his Troupe had provided a Yiddish literary education for hundreds of young people: “I remember the respect with which the young actors paged through the plays and studied the roles that belonged to our young folk literature [...] The student youth in Odessa who attended our performances were inspired and began to search for a way to enter into the young Yiddish literature.”¹⁰⁵ The goal of Hirschbein’s literary Yiddish art theater, then, was simply to develop a mass readership for the modern Yiddish writer.

From its inception, the Hirschbein Troupe encountered two obstacles that proved difficult to surmount. First, the company was faced with a dearth of serious dramatic repertoire. In response, Hirschbein wrote plays and one-acts at a dizzying pace to provide enough repertoire for his troupe. Second, though the Hirschbein Troupe had plenty of committed actors and directors, they lacked an important constituent – a drama-literate audience. With inconsistent audience attendance and a lack of funding from the local Jewish community, the Hirschbein Troupe was constantly forced to choose between their high-minded ideals of artistic integrity and economic viability. Their first play, *Shadkhonim* [*Matchmakers*], was a second-rate piece written by a wealthy Odessa lawyer who agreed to fund the initial productions of the Troupe on the

¹⁰⁴ Hirschbein, “Dos literarishe teater: likoved dem finf un tsvantsikstn yubiley fun der Folksbine,” 1940. Peretz Hirschbein Collection (RG 833), Folder 109, 24. YIVO.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 24-25.

condition that they perform his work.¹⁰⁶ With few alternatives, Hirschbein accepted the compromise.

In spite of its lack of literary quality, *Shadkhonim* was a moderate critical success when it premiered at Odessa's Harmonia Theater. A second performance followed, this time Hirschbein's drama *Tkies-kaf* [*The Handshake*] on January 26, 1909. The Odessa critics were impressed, and this time the Troupe was even able to fill the theater. The next evening, the Troupe performed another Hirschbein drama, *Di neveyle* [*The Carcass*], to a second full house. Like Peretz's *Temptation* in Warsaw, the Hirschbein Troupe's initial productions managed to attract a more diverse audience than the Odessa Yiddish theater had ever seen before, including Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian writers and journalists, students from the Russian drama school and their teachers, regular Yiddish theatergoers accustomed to the Odessa *shund* stage, and Jews who ordinarily did not attend Yiddish productions who were intrigued by the promise of a better Yiddish theater.¹⁰⁷ The Odessa Russian press was particularly supportive of the new company. Indeed, it was *Russian* journalists who first designated the Hirschbein Troupe as a "Yiddish art theater" company, thus creating an explicit link between Hirschbein's company and the internationally acclaimed work of the Moscow Art Theater.

Odessa's Jewish intellectuals were impressed by the effusive accolades in the Russian press. In contrast to their earlier disregard for his writing, the literati of Odessa began to laud Hirschbein for his achievements. Crucially, these Yiddish intellectuals began to praise Hirschbein well before the company had developed any sort of national or international presence – indeed, before the troupe was known at all outside of Odessa. What was important for these writers was not whether or not Hirschbein would achieve theatrical success per se (i.e. artistic

¹⁰⁶ Yankev Mestel, *Literatur un teater* (New York: IKUF, 1962), 95.

¹⁰⁷ Nokhem Oyslender, *Yidisher teater, 1887-1917* (Moscow: Der Emes, 1940), 241.

recognition from the international theater community), but rather his role in the creation of a new audience for the Yiddish theater. The *actual* theatrical productions themselves were less important than the Troupe's *perceived* ability to create the intellectual forum that these writers had long envisioned. As Hirschbein later recalled:

It was *Jewish cultural work* that we, still young people, began to create in the Jewish streets of Odessa [...] *With the help of the Yiddish language* we prevailed. It was the first time that young people, actors, had polished the language – the better and clearer to pronounce the performed word.¹⁰⁸

Here we can see perhaps most clearly the effect that the Czernowitz conference had on young theater enthusiasts like Hirschbein. In the spirit of Peretz and Czernowitz, the Hirschbein Troupe was founded with the hope that its “literary” productions would elevate the Yiddish theater to the level of a national artistic institution.

Yet outside of its basic aim to stage a “literary repertoire,” the Hirschbein Troupe never declared any overarching artistic or aesthetic goals. Hirschbein never wrote a theatrical manifesto. The question of artistic aim also did not seem to concern the Odessa critics, who focused their attention almost exclusively on the Troupe's literary repertoire. The critical response was so overwhelmingly positive during the first year of the Hirschbein Troupe's existence that competitors organized a short-lived rival “Yiddish art theater” in 1909 in hopes of attracting the Troupe's dedicated audience (they did not succeed).¹⁰⁹ Of course, Odessa's Yiddish theater critics were not necessarily the most qualified to evaluate the quality of a production – Odessa was no center of Yiddish theater culture, and most of those who were writing about the Hirschbein Troupe had not had much practice in theater criticism. But this did not seem to register for Hirschbein, who was certain that he had finally accomplished Peretz's

¹⁰⁸ Hirschbein, *In gang*, 324. My emphasis.

¹⁰⁹ Shloyme Kutner began his theatre career as an actor in the rival company until he was recruited by Hirschbein in 1909. See Shloyme Kutner, “Zikhroynes fun der Hirshbayn-trupe,” *Teater un kunst*, 2 February 1923, 6.

dream and began to think about returning to Warsaw to demonstrate the Hirschbein Troupe's achievements before his mentor.

In the summer of 1909, the Hirschbein Troupe toured southern Russia and Bessarabia. That winter, they returned to Odessa and added pieces by Jacob Gordin and Dovid Pinski to their repertoire. However, audience turnout in Odessa was far lower than Hirschbein had anticipated, and the Troupe did not earn enough to continue renting their performance space for long. When a group of influential writers (Peretz among them) invited the Hirschbein Troupe to perform in Warsaw, Hirschbein accepted. This would be their chance to prove their legitimacy before the most prominent Jewish intellectuals of the era. Moreover, the Warsaw engagement had the potential to once and for all bring the company members some much-needed financial stability. With these twin goals in mind, Hirschbein and his actors set off in February 1910 to make their mark on the cultural capital of Polish Jewry.

A Storm Gathers

At the beginning of 1910, Warsaw was the hub of a thriving Yiddish culture. Of Warsaw's many Yiddish newspapers, the two largest (*Haynt* and *Der moment*) printed a combined total of 200,000 copies per day.¹¹⁰ Since the founding of the Hirschbein Troupe in 1908, the theater debate had only grown stronger in Warsaw. Literary clubs held lecture series and evening courses almost nightly where locals could study the history of Jewish and European theaters. As Yiddish theater reviews became an increasingly popular feature in the press, new Yiddish periodicals devoted entirely to theater emerged: *Theater*, *Art and Theater*, and *Yiddish*

¹¹⁰ Steinlauf, "Fear of Purim," 45.

Drama, and others. Some members of Peretz's circle began talking about a "*teater-shturem*", a brewing "theater storm" that would soon take over all of Warsaw.¹¹¹

Peretz, however, was exhausted by the failure of his efforts to change Warsaw's Yiddish theater landscape. When Mukdoyni came to Warsaw in late 1909, he recalled that the great writer was nearly "extinguished from despair. He had thrown himself, with his typical zest, into theater work [...] But a curse lay upon the Yiddish theater."¹¹² Peretz was so frustrated that he refused to even discuss theater with his colleagues anymore. The Hirschbein Troupe in Odessa remained a distant hope, but in the meantime *shund* theater was only growing more popular in Warsaw. Mukdoyni persisted and the two writers began once again to come up with a plan. It was clear that the theater circle had in fact succeeded in developing an interest in a Yiddish art theater among the intelligentsia. At the same time, they had failed to create the audience to support their "better" productions. "It became clear," Mukdoyni later recalled of his conversations with Peretz, "that we had created a wide audience of *readers* of theater criticism, but not at all yet an audience of good theater *attendees*."¹¹³

1909 also marked the year that the popular Yiddish daily *Der fraynd* moved its entire publishing operation from Moscow to Warsaw. Mukdoyni convinced the new editor to run a feature on Yiddish theater alongside a series of programmatic essays articulating *Fraynd's* vision for the future of Yiddish culture. This article was the first statement by a member of Peretz's circle to be published under the editorial stamp of a major Yiddish paper. Peretz's campaign to overthrow *shund* theater now had the official support of one of Warsaw's largest Yiddish newspapers. A group of influential writers and critics began to gather regularly in *Fraynd's*

¹¹¹ Mukdoyni, "Zikhroynes," 371.

¹¹² Mukdoyni, *Y.L. Perets*, 137.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 150.

offices to discuss theater reform. In addition to Peretz's circle of theater critics, this group included playwright Sholem Asch, poet Avrom Reyzen, critic Bal-Makhshoves, writer H.D. Nomborg, and *Fraynd*'s new Warsaw editor Shmuel Rosenfeld.¹¹⁴ In the offices and pages of *Fraynd*, their new press organ, Warsaw's most prominent literary figures declared their public support for Peretz's Yiddish art theater project.

By the fall of 1909, these writers had reason to feel optimistic. *Fraynd* now featured theater reviews nearly every day, and readers seemed to be discussing these theater columns everywhere: at dinner parties, in synagogue, on the street. Indeed, the time seemed to be ripe for the success of their project. As Mukdoyni recalled, this was a period in which "everything that Yiddish writers took up had the utmost success. [...] There was an unofficial union of writers, painters, musicians, and other proponents of Yiddish art and culture, and when one tried something, there were capable and energetic hands ready to work."¹¹⁵ Peretz and his colleagues may well have hoped that this "unofficial union" of artists dedicated to furthering Yiddish culture would build a new theater that could benefit from all of their talents.

Feeling hopeful in light of this welcoming atmosphere, Peretz decided to organize a public demonstration advocating for a new mode of Yiddish theater. With brazen confidence, he rented the largest and most impressive building in Warsaw: the Philharmonia, a Polish music hall that was known as one of the premiere concert halls in all of Europe. Even Peretz's closest friends could scarcely believe that he had the nerve to ask the Polish aristocracy to rent him the Philharmonia for a Jewish gathering. There were frightening rumors that later proved to be

¹¹⁴ Mukdoyni, *Y.L. Perets*, 151-152.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

unfounded of planned anti-Semitic reprisals and Polish demonstrators picketing the event.¹¹⁶

Nevertheless, Peretz and his literary colleagues began to publicize that they would be holding a “Theater Symposium” on January 22nd, 1910. *Fraynd* prominently featured front-page advertisements for Peretz’s Symposium in the weeks leading up to the conference. Entitled “About Theater,” the Symposium would feature four lectures: Dr. Mukdoyni on actors and acting, Vayter on Yiddish theater audiences, Nomberg on the history of the Yiddish theater to date, and finally, Peretz’s keynote speech outlining his vision of the Yiddish theater to come.¹¹⁷

The publicity campaign was a tremendous success. When the speakers arrived, they were astonished to discover a crowd numbering in the many thousands. The Philharmonia Hall could seat well over two thousand spectators, and Peretz and the other speakers had never once imagined that they would fill the vast music hall. Instead, the lines were so long that tickets sold out over an hour before the Symposium began and hundreds were turned away at the box office. Those who were able to secure tickets found themselves in an auditorium overflowing with people. Every seat was occupied and hundreds more eagerly crammed into the gallery, the balcony, and the corners of the theater. Still, as *Fraynd*’s front-page review of the symposium the following day noted, this enormous audience entered the auditorium with a remarkable sense of purpose. “Knowing that the question of the Yiddish theater is one of the most pressing issues of our cultural life,” *Fraynd*’s editors wrote, “the audience quickly took up the initiative [...] and, despite the size of the audience, it was silent in the hall.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Indeed, as Nahma Sandrow has described, anti-Semitic tensions were especially high in Warsaw at the time. In the winter of 1909-1910, Poles were boycotting Jewish stores in large numbers. Fear that the symposium might attract negative attention from Warsaw’s Polish population was a serious concern. Sandrow, 203.

¹¹⁷ See, for example, the front-page advertisement for the Theater Symposium that appeared in *Fraynd* on January 5, 1910, 1.

¹¹⁸ “A groyse farzamlung vegn yidishn teater,” *Fraynd*, 10 January 1910, 1.

The same themes that had dominated the speakers' early Yiddish theater reviews were heavily represented in the speeches. Mukdoyni's lecture outlined the position of the Yiddish theater artist, invoking Peretz's description of the theater as a Jewish holy space by describing the actor as "the *Kohen* [member of a Jewish priestly class] in the Temple of Art."¹¹⁹ Mukdoyni also charged Jewish society with the responsibility to turn to "the God of art and support the new Yiddish theater – "the most important national institution."¹²⁰ Vayter, the second lecturer, spoke of the need to create a new audience of Yiddish theatergoers that reflected all elements of Jewish society – including its "estranged [*farfremdte*] intelligentsia." Moreover, Vayter suggested, reforming the Yiddish theater was a necessary precursor to building a thriving modern Jewish culture. In the third lecture, Nomberg blamed the coarse tastes of the audience for the prevalence of *shund* theater. "Guilty is the audience that sees such things nonchalantly and does not protest," Nomberg decried. Invoking the character of the crass brothel owner in Sholem Asch's famous play *God of Vengeance*, Nomberg condemned Yiddish theater audiences: "The only patrons of the Yiddish theater – and this is a disgrace to have to utter such a truth – the only supporters are the... Yankl Shapshovitshes."¹²¹

Peretz was the last to speak. Agreeing with what his younger colleagues had said, he further emphasized the national import of his campaign for a better Yiddish theater. "The [contemporary] Yiddish theater is lowly," Peretz insisted, "The *holiest place*, trampled underfoot."¹²² Who, then, was to blame for this sacrilege? Yiddish writers were not at fault,

¹¹⁹ "A groyse farzamlung."

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid. In Asch's *God of Vengeance*, Yankl Shapshovitsh is a pimp who lives with his family above the brothel he owns. Over the course of the play, he tries – and fails – to keep his only daughter "pure" and unaware of the business he runs downstairs.

¹²² Turkow-Grudberg, *Perets der veker*, 30.

Peretz told the audience, for even if there had been no refined Yiddish dramas at all, the Yiddish theater still might have produced artistically serious productions of European dramas in translation. Nor was the state of the theater the fault of the actors, those “unlucky artists who work day and night.”¹²³ Peretz never did explain who or what was to blame for the *shund* theater. Instead, he concluded his speech with a battle cry: “Let no Jewish foot cross the threshold of the old Yiddish theater. We will destroy it, and upon its ruins we will build the new Yiddish art theater!”¹²⁴ Thunderous applause filled the Philharmonia. Peretz’s fiery speech, Mukdoyni later recalled, gave those who were gathered the impression that “we had beheaded the Yiddish theater during this symposium.”¹²⁵ A second gathering was held on the following week, to another packed crowd numbering in the thousands.

The theater symposium had created a sensation in Warsaw, and Yiddish newspapers and periodicals printed dozens of editorials debating the fine points of the lectures over the next few weeks. Most of these articles were in favor of the reforms outlined by Peretz and his colleagues. A few were opposed. Esther Rokhl Kaminska’s new theater troupe Di Fareynikte [The United Ones] published a bitter diatribe against the symposium organizers in *Unzer Lebn*, arguing that the “serious” and “literary” Yiddish theater already existed – in their company. Dovid Frishman published a series of harsh essays in *Haynt* criticizing the Philharmonia evening as an unnecessary publicity stunt. Another critic, Noyekh Prilutski, charged that Peretz’s attack on the Yiddish stage was purely motivated by selfish concerns: the desire to see *his* neglected plays

¹²³ Turkow-Grudberg, *Perets der veker*, 30.

¹²⁴ Quoted in Leib Kadison, “A bisl zikhroynes,” *Literarische bleter* 36-45 (Sept. – Nov. 1931), 692. In Yiddish: “Zol keyn yidishe fus nisht aribertretn di shvel fun altn yidishn teater. Mir veln dos tshemetern, un af di khurves oyfboyen dos naye kinstlerishe yidishe teater!” Kadison describes how this phrase inspired the creation of FADA, the company that would later become the Vilna Troupe.

¹²⁵ Mukdoyni, *Y.L. Perets*, 158.

performed.¹²⁶ On the whole, however, the response to the symposium was overwhelming positive. Across the city, Warsaw's Jewish intellectuals hotly debated the prospect of reforming the Yiddish theater to serve the aims of the intelligentsia.

It was against this background of the resounding success of the theater symposium that Peretz extended his invitation to bring the Hirschbein Troupe to Warsaw. The lecturers had successfully placed the "theater question" at the forefront of Jewish cultural discourse in Warsaw. When Peretz and his colleagues read the laudatory reviews about the Hirschbein Troupe in the Yiddish and Russian press, they realized that they might pin their hopes on the young company that had achieved unprecedented success in Odessa. The turnout at the symposium – nearly five thousand people in total –convinced Peretz that he had finally built up a large enough audience to support a practicing Yiddish art theater. A successful Warsaw performance by the Hirschbein Troupe would secure the international reputation of the company as the representative of Peretz's theatrical vision. And so, with high hopes once again, Peretz and his colleagues officially welcomed the Hirschbein Troupe to Warsaw in February of 1910

"A Slap in the Face"

Hirschbein himself was the first to arrive. In his first conversation with Peretz, Mukdoyni, and Dinezon, he testily announced that he had not come to Warsaw to take an examination.¹²⁷ This was something of an empty pronouncement. Hirschbein did in fact view the engagement in Warsaw as a test of his company's theatrical ability. Thanks largely to the efforts of Peretz and his colleagues, Warsaw had become the center of the Yiddish theater world.

¹²⁶ Mukdoyni, *Y.L. Perets*, 160.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

Hirschbein knew that in order to succeed at all, the Troupe first had to achieve recognition in Warsaw. As Hirschbein later recalled:

I knew quite well that elsewhere people considered my entry into theater to have gone awry. I felt this even in Odessa. [...] I also knew that in Warsaw, if we had the opportunity to perform, it would be like passing an examination.¹²⁸

Hirschbein was well aware that the first performance in Warsaw, a cosmopolitan city whose cultured inhabitants were accustomed to seeing the best professional theater troupes in the world, could have two possible outcomes: it could either permanently ameliorate the Troupe's dire financial situation, or it could be the company's last.¹²⁹

The Warsaw Yiddish press anticipated the Hirschbein Troupe's arrival with a rush of enthusiasm, though none of the journalists had actually seen the company perform. Bal-Makhshoves called the Troupe "the first company of intelligent theater-lovers."¹³⁰ Avrom Reisen praised Hirschbein for limiting his Troupe to actors who were *gymnasium*-educated and literate in Russian. Reisen was particularly effusive in his admiration for the actors' familiarity with Yiddish literary classics: "Yiddish actors reading Yiddish writers..." Reisen wondered, "It was truly a marvel and, even more so, a spiritual satisfaction."¹³¹ Mukdoyni was also initially thrilled by the composition of the troupe: "young, lively people, a completely new occurrence for the theater [...] All were well-read in Russian literature."¹³² Paradoxically, the very critics who had

¹²⁸ Hirschbein, *In gang*, 383.

¹²⁹ Some of the actors from the Hirschbein Troupe later tried to challenge this view in their memoirs, arguing that the Troupe was not financially destitute at all and that it had done well in its last tour of Odessa. See, for example, Kutner, 6. However, historians and Hirschbein himself have strongly disagreed with this interpretation. *Ibid.*, 383-384.

¹³⁰ Published the day before the Troupe's first performance in Warsaw. Bal Makhshoves, "Shtrikhn un gedanken – Perets Hirshbayns trupe," *Fraynd*, 25 February 1910, 2.

¹³¹ Avrom Reyzen, "Di vanderndike yidishe trupe" in *Perets Hirshbayn*, ed. Shmuel Niger (New York: Komitet Yoyvl Hirshbayn, 1941), 205.

¹³² Mukdoyni, *Y.L. Pererts*, 168.

criticized the Yiddish *shund* theater for its “foreignness” now lauded the Hirschbein actors’ knowledge of Russian classics. It was thus the actors’ dual education in Russian and Yiddish literature that positioned the Hirschbein Troupe as a literary company and the fulfillment of Peretz’s vision of a “serious,” “artistic,” and “better” theater.

Yet for the Warsaw intellectuals who had extended the invitation, the actual arrival of the Hirschbein Troupe brought several ominous surprises. First, instead of expressing gratitude for the invitation, Hirschbein seemed defensive when asked about the Troupe’s achievements. When Dinezon asked him to explain why there was only a single work by Peretz (the one-act play *Sisters*) in the Troupe’s repertoire, Hirschbein responded by declaring that his company already had a solid reputation.¹³³ Next, the Warsaw writers were shocked to discover the true state of the company’s finances. The actors seemed far too young and immature, their clothes were tattered, and they were virtually penniless. Compared to the polished personas of the actors in the literary Russian and Polish theaters, the manners of the Hirschbein Troupe left much to be desired. Instead of the refined and cultured actor-intellectuals whom they had been expecting, Warsaw’s writers found themselves confronted with a ragtag group of young actors who, as Mukdoyni recalled, “did not make the best impression on all of us, neither on the stage nor in private life.”¹³⁴

Still, Warsaw’s Jewish intellectuals hoped that the first performance would compensate for the Troupe’s lackluster arrival. As with *Temptation*, Peretz once again took part in the preparations. Rehearsals were held in Peretz’s living room, where he offered copious advice to

¹³³ Mukdoyni, “Zikhroynes,” 380.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 381.

Hirschbein and the actors.¹³⁵ Peretz also recruited local youth to serve as extras, and advised Hirschbein on every aspect of the production.

On February 26, 1910, the Hirschbein Troupe opened at Warsaw's Muranover Theater with a sold-out production of two one-act plays: Sholem Asch's *Mitn shtrom* and Sholem Aleichem's *Mentshn*. The theater was filled with major literary and political figures from the Warsaw Jewish community, with Peretz accorded a prominent seat in the front row. As described at the opening of this chapter, Peretz and his colleagues were bitterly disappointed.¹³⁶ The Hirschbein Troupe continued its residency in Warsaw for another week, but the disappointment of the intellectual community grew stronger with each additional performance. Mukdoyni published daily reviews in *Fraynd* arguing that Hirschbein's "new" Yidish theater was, in spite of its good intentions, no better than *shund*. Each review was more critical than the last.

The Yiddish theater lacks a repertoire, a director, and a good audience. The "new" theater [The Hirschbein Troupe], which recently toured in Warsaw, has not eliminated the first two of these deficiencies. The repertoire is almost identical, and the directing is the same, only a good audience was at the performances - who came with great hopes and with legitimate demands - and who left bitterly disappointed [...] The new theater has only good intentions, high aspirations, but it is unable to realize any of them.¹³⁷

Peretz was remarkably silent on the subject of the Hirschbein Troupe, perhaps out of a desire to maintain his friendship with Hirschbein, perhaps out of embarrassment or fury. A few writers with a vested stake in Hirschbein's success, including Dinezon, Bal-Makhshoves, and Nomberg, rushed to the Troupe's defense, but soon they too stopped attending the nightly performances. The enormous audience that had initially filled the Elysium Theater beyond capacity dwindled rapidly. By the end of their tour in Warsaw, the Hirschbein Troupe had no profit to show for

¹³⁵ Zylbercweig, 3:2020.

¹³⁶ The second act, which was directed by Dovid Herman and featured a young Jacob Ben-Ami, was reportedly a major improvement over the first act, which was directed by Hirschbein. Mukdoyni, *Y.L. Perets*, 171.

¹³⁷ From an article published in *Der shtral* upon the company's departure from Warsaw. Quoted in Mukdoyni, "Zikhroyes," 382-383.

their urban debut. It was, as Hirschbein later recalled, a “slap in the face” for the fledgling theater company.¹³⁸ They had come to Warsaw flush with a success unprecedented in the Yiddish theater. Even the Russian critics had taken notice, and had granted them the prestigious moniker “Yiddish art theater.” They were, as Hirschbein often told his actors, “an oasis in the desert of Yiddish theater.”¹³⁹ Yet in spite of these achievements, Hirschbein’s mentors and literary idols had unequivocally rejected the Troupe’s offerings.¹⁴⁰ This was a bitter pill for Hirschbein and his actors to swallow. They appealed to the Warsaw Jewish community for financial assistance, to no avail. In desperation, Hirschbein sold his beloved writing desk for income and the Troupe left Warsaw for the provinces.¹⁴¹

After a few dozen unsuccessful performances in Minsk, Kovne, and Bobruisk, the members of the Hirschbein Troupe decided to separate. On July 7, 1910, the Troupe held its very last performance in the town of Dvinsk, before a miniscule audience compared to the thousands of spectators at the Muranover Theater in Warsaw. Prior to the performance, Hirschbein told his troupe that he refused to continue as their director any longer.¹⁴² Their But in Warsaw, Hirschbein had taken the criticism of his company to heart. He had failed the ultimate test before an audience of his literary idols and mentors. After the actors departed, Hirschbein mourned the

¹³⁸ Hirschbein, *In gang*, 389.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Hirschbein later blamed Peretz, Nomberg, Dinezon, Vayter, and Mukdoyni for trying to undermine the Hirschbein Troupe in order to bring about their own theater company. Outside of Hirschbein’s accusations, I could not find any evidence to support this claim.

¹⁴¹ Upon being blamed for the dissolution of the Hirschbein Troupe, Mukdoyni later wrote that had he known the true financial predicament of the Troupe, he would have softened his attacks. Mukdoyni, “Zikhroyes,” 380.

¹⁴² For an official announcement of the Troupe’s dissolution, see “Oyfgeheret tsu ekzistirn Hirshbayns trupe,” *Gut Morgen* (Odessa), 12 July 1910, 3.

loss of his troupe, feeling “like a mother who gave away her children, knowing that they made bad marriages.”¹⁴³

For two years, the Hirschbein Troupe had toured Eastern Europe performing “better Yiddish theater,” though critics ultimately challenged the accuracy of this description. In spite of the excitement generated by the founding of the Hirschbein Troupe, the Troupe’s performances were a disappointment to virtually all of their supporters, Peretz foremost among them. Scarcely two years after Hirschbein founded his company in hopes of revolutionizing the Yiddish theater, the Hirschbein Troupe was dissolved one evening in the small town of Dvinsk, only a few months after a series of disastrous performances in the Jewish cultural capital of Warsaw.

Yet the Hirschbein Troupe was the first Yiddish theater company of its kind to receive serious and sustained attention from the Jewish intelligentsia. Though the Troupe failed to live up to the artistic promise of its publicity, the theatrical interest that it generated among Jewish intellectuals was lasting. When the theater critic A. Mukdoyni toured the Polish countryside at the end of 1910, he was pleasantly surprised to discover “a great interest in the theater, which had arisen in a very short time.”¹⁴⁴ The Hirschbein Troupe, inspired by Peretz’s vision, was largely responsible for this new enthusiasm for the Yiddish stage. In spite of its ultimate failure to live up to Peretz’s art theater dreams, the Hirschbein Troupe – as one Yiddish theater historian put it – “laid the foundations for a Yiddish art theater with European theater culture.”¹⁴⁵

Hirschbein was even more specific. “Our Troupe,” he wrote, “laid the groundwork for the Vilna Troupe, which emerged a few years later [...] Each branch of Vilna Troupe carries the mission to fight for a better theater; to separate themselves from *shund* as much as possible, and to maintain

¹⁴³ Hirschbein, *In gang*, 410.

¹⁴⁴ Mukdoyni, “Zikhroynes,” 379.

¹⁴⁵ Buchvald, *Teater*, 387.

a relationship to the Yiddish word and to literature. This was *our* tradition.”¹⁴⁶ Though an enormous critical and financial failure in its time, the Hirschbein Troupe was ultimately perhaps the most successful element of Peretz’s theater campaign in its direct impact on the future of the Yiddish art theater movement.

Final Attempt: The Gezelshaft Theater

With Peretz’s hopes for a Yiddish art theater dashed yet again, Warsaw’s Jewish writers did not dare to speak about building a new theater – for a time. In the spring of 1910, Mukdoyni later recalled, Warsaw was “quiet, the quiet after the great storm that we had started.”¹⁴⁷

The silence did not last long. By the spring, theater criticism once again began to appear regularly in the Yiddish press. While some Yiddish writers chose to boycott the theaters in the aftermath of the Hirschbein’s Troupe’s failure, others charged intellectuals to attend the Yiddish *shund* theaters and demand change. Typical was an article published in April of 1910 by theater critic Noyekh Prilutski entitled “The Jewish Intellectual and the Yiddish Theater,” in which the author called upon writers to stop criticizing the Yiddish theater and instead watch over its development as one safeguards a child who is just learning how to walk:

We approach the Yiddish actor with revolver-criticism [*revolverkritik*] and boycott-agitation [*boykotagitatsye*]...but isn’t our theater still just a suckling babe – barely out of his swaddling clothes – who takes his first steps with weak, shaking feet? His parents and the entire household watch over the baby fearfully, for he cannot yet hold his balance. They guard him as you guard your own eye, they take hold of his hands to steady him. The tragedy is that the so-called ‘Jewish intellectual’ is not capable of feeling for our young theater that which parents feel for a living child. Has he worried about the Yiddish stage? Has it ever occurred to him that the play that the wandering actors ‘practice’ has a national-cultural significance, is a part of our living cultural present? [...] The solution

¹⁴⁶ Peretz Hirschbein, “Eliyahu hanovi, oder der letster etap.” Unpublished manuscript, September 1930. Peretz Hirschbein Papers (RG 833), Folder 116, YIVO. My emphasis.

¹⁴⁷ Mukdoyni, *Y.L. Perets*, 176.

must be: *go to the Yiddish theater, regardless of how terrible it may be*. Support it materially and morally. Only in doing so lies the guarantee of the theater's evolution.¹⁴⁸

Peretz, for his part, had recovered from his disappointment over the Hirschbein Troupe debacle enough to begin thinking again about his theater campaign. He gathered his theater circle once again and together they debated their options. Instead of turning to others to create the Yiddish art theater, Peretz and his colleagues reasoned, why not found this new theater themselves under the auspices of Warsaw's vibrant Literary Society? The Literary Society, founded in 1909, included all of the members of Peretz's theater circle among its ranks, and the "theater question" had frequently been the subject of discussion at its meetings. As an organization composed entirely of Yiddish writers and intellectuals, perhaps the Society could support a Yiddish art theater of its own. This, then, would be an "intellectual theater" in the truest sense of the term: a theater directly founded and supported by Warsaw's most prominent Jewish literary organization. The Society would provide the theater with financial security and a permanent intellectual affiliation; the theater, in turn, would provide the Literary Society with a final answer to the theater debates of the past few years: a theater that would inspire pride and not disgust among Jewish intellectuals

First, the Literary Society formed a special theater commission – whose members declared themselves the "Yiddish Theater Society" – to develop a strategy. This time it was a younger writer, A. Vayter, who was the driving force behind the project. With Peretz's support and blessing, Vayter drafted a plan for the proposed Literary Society Yiddish art theater. The plan called for a large influx of cash to get the project off the ground, and Vayter diligently wrote hundreds of letters to prominent Jewish writers and leaders and traveled across Eastern Europe soliciting funds. Unfortunately for Vayter and the members of the Theater Society, few Jews of

¹⁴⁸ Noyekh Prilutski, *Yidish teater: 1905-1912* (Bialystok: A. Albek, 1921), 63.

means were interested in contributing to their project. Vayter and Peretz had imagined that raising the necessary funds with the support of the literary establishment would be a simple task. They were soon disabused of this notion. As the year wore on, an increasingly desperate Vayter began to contribute his own meager salary to the empty coffers, even starving himself for days to pay for the train tickets and stamps necessary to continue fundraising for the project.¹⁴⁹

The Theater Society, now nearly bankrupt, asked more members to take an active role in the fundraising effort.¹⁵⁰ In the winter of 1910-1911, Vayter undertook another fundraising trip to Kiev, while Sholem Asch went to Riga.¹⁵¹ Neither had much success. In the meantime, Peretz wrote a letter to his famous colleague Sholem Yankev Abramovitch (who wrote under the pseudonym Mendeley Moykher Sforim) pleading for his support:

Dear, dear Mendeley,
A new Yiddish theater must be built. To this end we turn to the community for help. Thousands and thousands of Jewish souls go to the theater daily (or rather: nightly). They hear not a single Yiddish word when the plays are bearable, and only Yiddish when the worst *shund* is performed. Yiddish and *shund* are fused in the theater. [...] A group of writers and leaders in Warsaw [...] have decided to enter into this matter with an appeal. And in the name of this group, I ask you very sincerely if you would allow us to inscribe your name as well. [...] We ask you again, and with heartfelt pleas, to immediately reply with your permission to print your name under the above-mentioned appeal.¹⁵²

Mendeley declined the request. Though a prolific dramatist in his own right, Mendeley was extremely skeptical of Peretz's theater campaign. This was typical of the older generation of Yiddish writers, who often spoke of their desire for a better Yiddish theater, but were convinced that such a thing could never come to pass.

¹⁴⁹ Sandrow, 207.

¹⁵⁰ The Society tried to organize a cooperative theater as a joint-stock venture that would be funded by investor shares sold for ten rubles a piece. These fundraising trips were largely supported by an existing network of Jewish literary societies. See Jeffrey Veidlinger, *Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 192-194.

¹⁵¹ Zylbercweig, 3:2028.

¹⁵² Mayzel, *Briv un redes*, 290-291.

Peretz's appeal to Mendele – a writer who had decisively chosen to take no part in the theater campaign – reflects the growing desperation of the Literary Society members, who had little to show for their fundraising effort and were as far from realizing their goal as ever. In March of 1911, Peretz and his wife set off for Russia. Their local sponsor, the Yiddish Literary Society of St. Petersburg, organized a fundraising banquet in Peretz's honor, to which they invited prominent Jewish writers and business leaders. Initially, the attendees seemed enthusiastic and ready to contribute. Several prominent writers – among them, historian Shimon Dubnov – gave speeches lauding Peretz for his theater work. However, all of the speeches were in Russian, which rankled Peretz. Forgetting both his fundraising mission and his manners, he snapped at the speakers and stormed out of the banquet. As one attendee recalled:

The guest [Peretz] was silent the entire time. His thick lower lip hung down sullenly, and his cold and tired eyes wandered about... Suddenly, after one of the Russian speeches, Peretz hastily stood up and, in an agitated voice and with blazing eyes, he shouted: "I cannot, I will not... you offend me with your Russian speeches. It is insulting that you speak to me in a foreign language! It is a disgrace to our people."¹⁵³

When Peretz returned to Warsaw, he furiously recounted the incident to the horror of Mukdoyni, Vayter, and the entire Literary Society. Peretz remained steadfast in the belief that he had responded correctly. "Jews who welcome a Yiddish writer with Russian speeches will not build a Yiddish culture," he told Mukdoyni. "They will not build a Yiddish theater. They will not even build a Yiddish stable, because even a Yiddish stable must be built in Yiddish."¹⁵⁴ For Peretz, the Yiddish art theater project was first and foremost about the elevation of Yiddish literary and intellectual culture through the medium of the stage. The Petersburg Jews' embrace of the Russian language made them unworthy to take part in founding a Yiddish art theater. But his younger colleagues Mukdoyni and Vayter were crushed when they learned of the outcome of

¹⁵³ Niger, *Perets zayn lebn*, 429.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

Peretz's trip. The fate of their entire project had hinged upon the success of Peretz's fundraising trip. His failure to raise the necessary funds was its death knell. Without the financial support of the Russian-Jewish magnates, there was little hope for the Yiddish art theater project. Peretz's theater campaign had finally come to an end. Despite a series of extraordinary efforts, there was nothing to show for it, save for the broken dreams of Peretz and the members of his circle.

Aftermath

While Peretz's campaign for a Yiddish art theater may have ended in 1911, he never ceased to dream about its fulfillment. After the failure of the Literary Society project, Peretz was never again tried to create a professional Yiddish theater. For a brief moment in 1913, Peretz halfheartedly tried to pick up the threads of his failed theater campaign and got involved in the amateur Yiddish theaters that were thriving in Warsaw and throughout Europe and America. He contacted the Lodz-based amateur Yiddish theater group "Dramatishe Kunst" ["Dramatic Art"], connected the actors with his directing protégé Dovid Herman, and tried to convince them to stage a production of his never-produced abstract drama *Bay nakht afn altn mark* [At Night in the Old Marketplace]. Unlike the artists of the professional Yiddish theater, the amateur Yiddish actors were not nearly as beholden to the financial success of any production – they had day jobs and did not expect to make a living from their theatrical activities. This financial flexibility, Peretz felt, might allow amateur companies to stage more refined or experimental work than their professional counterparts. Moreover, without having to pay salaries, amateur troupes had fewer production expenses and could thus afford to rehearse for longer periods. During this period, as one amateur actor in the company recalled, "Peretz believed that his plays could only

be produced by amateur actors who could spend a few months rehearsing.”¹⁵⁵ Yet while the amateur actors of Dramatishe Kunst readily embraced Herman’s directing style, they refused to produce what Peretz saw as his greatest play, arguing that their audience would not understand it. Instead, they staged a more straightforward play by Hirschbein. Disappointed, Peretz broke off his relationship with the company.

Nonetheless, this last phase of Peretz’s theater campaign, in which he pinned his hopes on the development of the amateur stage, was particularly prescient. As we will see in the next chapter, the Yiddish art theater movement that emerged during the interwar period did in fact develop directly out of the amateur Yiddish theaters, just as Peretz had foretold. Still without the benefit of foresight, the theater campaign must have seemed like a complete failure. In the short term, however, Peretz continued to advocate for a Yiddish art theater to everyone who would listen until the end of his life. In one 1911 interview, he delineated for an American newspaper correspondent all of the reasons why a better Yiddish theater had not yet succeeded:

In your question there are three factors: 1) The poet, the creator of the repertoire; 2) The artist, who must embody it; 3) and the capitalist, the businessman, who must build the theater, gather the members of a troupe, and support or give the first two, the poet and the artist, the ability to create. The first two exist already. We lack the entrepreneur. Perhaps America will provide him, with its cooperative spirit. Will it happen and when? – This I do not know. But this is the strongest reason that I am drawn to America.¹⁵⁶

Characteristically, Peretz did not place any blame on the quality of the productions he had staged. The problem was always the *means* of production, not the product. With the proper financial backing, Peretz was certain that Yiddish art theater could become a reality. Peretz imagined that the United States, with its entrepreneurial spirit, might provide the right kind of financial support for a new Yiddish art theater project. He later retracted this opinion as

¹⁵⁵ Zylbercweig, 3:2029.

¹⁵⁶ Mayzel, *Briv un redes*, 410.

American-style *shund*, enormously popular with New York audiences, was imported to Warsaw and Jewish communities throughout Eastern Europe.

In his final years, Peretz never ceased to speak of his hopes for a “better” Yiddish theater with his younger colleagues, perhaps hoping that a new generation might take up his campaign. Ironically, one of the younger writers with whom Peretz frequently discussed his ideas was Peretz Hirschbein. Years after the disastrous collapse of the Hirschbein Troupe, Peretz forgave Hirschbein – even formally apologizing to the younger writer for his treatment of the Hirschbein Troupe in Warsaw – and the two struck up a close friendship. Peretz confided in Hirschbein his thoughts about the failings of the American Yiddish stage:

Never mind that we have no proper theater here. But there, as they tell me, New York has several great [Yiddish] theaters. However, they have not produced your plays. This alone demonstrates that neither you nor I belong there. So it is no surprise to me that our writers, when they travel there [to America], mostly leave. Perhaps we should once again think about a theater?¹⁵⁷

Peretz’s obsession with a creating a Yiddish art theater remained a pressing occupation. Recent developments in the American Yiddish theater – the mass migrations of hopeful actors and playwrights to the United States and the emergence of a thriving Yiddish theater scene in New York – had only strengthened Peretz’s resolve that there ought to be a Yiddish theater for intellectuals, by intellectuals. If the American Yiddish theater was rejecting the work of “literary” writers like Hirschbein and himself, then it too would need to be overthrown to make way for the art theater of the future. Ironically, Peretz’s vision that a given theater’s willingness to produce Hirschbein’s plays could serve as a marker connoting its “art theater” status was also quite prescient, as this also came to pass in the interwar Yiddish art theater. Likewise, Peretz’s focus on building enthusiasm among writers for a Yiddish art theater was perhaps the most successful part of his theater campaign, as many of the writers, actors, and directors who

¹⁵⁷ Zylbercweig, 3:2028.

corresponded with Peretz about the theater during his final years would go on to become leading figures in the interwar Yiddish art theater movement.

As Peretz's theater campaign came to a close, the *shund* theater became even more popular in Warsaw as the city experienced an influx of repertoire and visiting actors from the New York.¹⁵⁸ American melodramatic plays were a hit with audiences, and the few Warsaw theaters that had once attempted to produce literary work turned en masse to *shund* as they competed with the visiting American theater companies for survival. The most popular Warsaw production of the period was Boris Thomashefsky's *Dos pintele yid* [*The Essential Spark of Jewishness*], an extremely melodramatic piece that ended with a star of David descending from the ceiling while the play's title was illuminated in glowing electric lights.¹⁵⁹ *Dos pintele yid* played over 200 times in Warsaw to packed houses.¹⁶⁰ Jewish writers and intellectuals responded with a "silent boycott." Echoing Peretz's activities in years past, impassioned youth attended the *shund* productions that now dominated Warsaw's Yiddish theaters and tried to sabotage the performances by shouting at the actors that they were poisoning the audience.¹⁶¹ But this time, an older Peretz did not take part in the anti-*shund* antics. One by one, the former members of Peretz's theater circle also turned their backs on the Yiddish theater: first Dinezon, then Nomberg, and finally, Mukdoyni and Vayter. Mukdoyni, who had wanted to be a professional Yiddish theater critic, was especially bitter. For years, Mukdoyni carried in his breast pocket the written proposal for the Literary Society's Yiddish art theater as he migrated from Warsaw to St.

¹⁵⁸ On the "American Period" in the Polish Yiddish theater between 1910 and 1913, see Mukdoyni, *Y.L. Perets*, 178.

¹⁵⁹ On the production of *Dos pintele yid* and the return to *shund* in the American Yiddish theater, see Nina Warnke, "Theater as Educational Institution: Jewish Immigrant Intellectuals and Yiddish Theater Reform" in *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*, eds. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Karp (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.), 23-41.

¹⁶⁰ Mukdoyni, *Y.L. Perets*, 201.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 199-200.

Petersburg to Kovne and, finally, to Berlin. It was not until 1923, on the eve of his emigration to the United States, that Mukdoyni finally let go of the proposal, burning it to rid himself of the unhappy memories it contained.¹⁶² Though he would ultimately reclaim his position as a theater critic committed to the Yiddish art theater movement during the interwar period, Mukdoyni spent a decade struggling to overcome his bitterness over the failure of Peretz's art theater campaign.

Peretz continued to write and publish dramas as late as 1914, with the publication of *Der hoyker* [*The Hunchback*]. He remained bitter to his dying day that his plays had hardly been performed during his lifetime; worse still, of those that were staged, not a single one was produced to his liking. Years later, Yiddish theater critics looking back on this era would blame Peretz for not writing stageworthy dramas. Shmuel Niger, in his 1952 biography of the great writer, wrote that Peretz was a skilled poet, storyteller, and essayist, but not a great dramatist.¹⁶³ Other biographers agreed with Niger's assessment. Beyond even the failure of his theatrical campaign, Turkow-Grudberg argued in 1965, Peretz's greatest disappointment was his *own* failure to become a successful playwright – though he was never willing to admit it¹⁶⁴ Ironically, Peretz's two attempts to write the ultimate dramatic masterpiece – *The Golden Chain* and *At Night in the Old Marketplace* – were the greatest stage failures of his entire dramatic oeuvre. While several of Peretz's one-acts achieved a small measure of success on the amateur Yiddish stage, the dramas that he so painstakingly revised were avoided by amateur and professional companies alike – until the interwar period, when they would be revived by a new generation of Yiddish actors who were not afraid to make significant modifications to Peretz's texts.

¹⁶² Mukdoyni, *Y.L. Perets*, 225.

¹⁶³ Niger, *Perets zayn lebn*, 430.

¹⁶⁴ Turkow-Grudberg, *Perets der veker*, 40. See too Turkow-Grudberg's section on "The Tragedy of Peretz the Dramatist" (40-45) for a detailed analysis of why Peretz's plays were so unsuccessful during his lifetime.

On April 3, 1915, during the intermediary days of Passover, Peretz died at home in Warsaw. For over a decade, he had fought tirelessly to develop a “Yiddish art theater” that would replace the *shund* melodramas of the popular Yiddish stage. Ironically, Peretz’s vision would come to pass just a few months after the great writer’s death; not in Warsaw, the great metropolitan center of modern Yiddish culture, but far up north, in a nearly unrecognizable Vilna ravaged by war. Contrary to Peretz’s vision of a new Yiddish theater organized by prominent writers and funded by wealthy bankers, the fulfillment of his vision had its unlikely origins in a motley band of starving young theater aficionados who would – to the surprise of everyone – make their mark on the history of the modern stage.

PART THREE: THE THIRD ACT

In 1909, thousands of miles from Warsaw, an American Yiddish playwright named Dovid Pinski (1872-1959) published a thin booklet entitled *Dos idishe drama* [*The Yiddish Drama*].¹⁶⁵ Pinski had collaborated with Peretz on several of the latter’s literary projects when he lived in Warsaw, and the two writers had developed a friendship that continued to flourish via correspondence after Pinski left. As Peretz worked on his theater campaign, he wrote frequently to Pinski and asked the younger playwright for advice. In return, Peretz offered Pinski encouragement, urging him to continue publishing his dramas and reviewing them frequently in prominent Warsaw publications.¹⁶⁶ The warm transatlantic correspondence between Peretz and Pinski between 1899 and 1907 attests to the personal and professional affinity the two writers

¹⁶⁵ The chapters of *Dos idishe drama* were initially published serially in 1908 in the Yiddish paper *Der arbeter*.

¹⁶⁶ See Mayzel, *Briv un redes*, especially 234-240. In an undated letter from around 1906, Peretz urged Pinski to read his glowing reviews of Pinski’s plays *Di muter* and *Di familye Tsvi* in the Warsaw daily *Der veg* (234).

felt for each other: Peretz frequently addressed his letters to “my best friend Pinski,” and Pinski returned the sentiment.¹⁶⁷ The two regularly exchanged letters commiserating about the failure of the theater campaign in Warsaw.

Pinski’s *The Yiddish Drama*, written at the precise midpoint of Peretz’s campaign, analogized the history of the Yiddish theater to the three-act structure of a play, a loose adaptation of Hegel’s idea of history progressing through a series of cumulative stages. The first “act” or stage of Yiddish theater was *shund* – theater with the sole purpose of entertaining the audience. Recently, Pinski argued, the Yiddish theater had entered the second act of its development: an era hovering on the border between *shund* and art. In the second act, wrote Pinski, content has become more important and the characters more lifelike; yet the plays still draw upon elements of *shund* for their dramatic effect. In the third act yet to come, these *shund* characteristics would disappear entirely and Yiddish drama would be purely based upon artistic principles. Pinski’s book thus envisioned a Yiddish theater poised at the brink of enormous change. Spearheading this transformation were three playwrights, whom Pinski dubbed “*di andere*” [“the others”] because their work differed so dramatically from everyone else working in the Yiddish theater. These three leaders were Peretz and his two playwright-disciples, Asch and Hirschbein. For the first time in the history of the Yiddish theater, Pinski argued, these three writers allowed the public “to view the Yiddish drama as art, as good literature.”¹⁶⁸

Pinski’s book focused solely on Yiddish *drama* rather than theatrical *performance*, and his statements throughout the booklet imply that elevating the literary quality of Yiddish dramatic texts was *the* central task in redefining the Yiddish theater. This was a point of major contention between Pinski and Peretz; as we have seen in this chapter, Peretz ultimately came to

¹⁶⁷ Mayzel, *Briv un redes*, 235.

¹⁶⁸ Dovid Pinski, *Dos idische drama: eyn iberblik iber ir entwiklung* (New York: S. Drukerman, 1909), 56.

believe that the theatrical revolution desired by intellectuals required writers to take an active role in staging productions, in addition to writing top-quality plays. Still, by 1909 the two friends agreed that the future of the Yiddish theater looked bright. The Yiddish art theater – the “third act” of Pinski’s history of the Yiddish drama; the culmination of Peretz’s theater campaign – seemed right on the horizon. But it was not to be. Pinski’s “third act” and Peretz’s vision were not to be fulfilled for nearly another decade.

Why did Peretz, the most prominent writer of his generation, fail so spectacularly with each and every attempt of his theater campaign? Shmeruk has written of Peretz as the most influential Yiddish writer in history, arguing that “over the whole Yiddish literary world, his approval was cited as the principal justification for any writer’s claim to fame.”¹⁶⁹ Why, then, was Peretz unable to translate his extraordinary influence into actual theater reform? And why was the Vilna Troupe able to succeed where Peretz had failed only a few years later?

A variety of factors contributed to the foundering of Peretz’s attempts to revolutionize the Yiddish theater.¹⁷⁰ First, Peretz suffered from a lack of practical experience in the theater. Outside of his experience as a spectator, he had no formal theater training. Without even a cursory knowledge of directing method, acting style, or even how to run a rehearsal, Peretz’s approach to crafting theater was simply that of a frustrated audience member. Similarly, in spite of his literary talent, Peretz lacked a finely tuned sense of how to structure a stage drama for maximal dramatic effect. While he had amassed a great deal of experience as a published playwright prior to 1905, his plays were intended to be *read* by fellow intellectuals, not *staged* for a mass audience. As Mukdoyni wrote of Peretz: “[He] was, ultimately, no more than a

¹⁶⁹ Chone Shmeruk, “Aspects of the History of Warsaw as a Yiddish Literary Center,” *Polin* 3 (1988): 152.

¹⁷⁰ See also Turkow-Grudberg’s chapter entitled “The Reasons for Peretz’s Disappointment” in *Perets der veker*, 29-33.

dilettante in the art of the theater. For him, theater was simply the drama, and his theatrical abilities did not extend any further.”¹⁷¹ Without an eye for theatricality or staging, Peretz was baffled as to why so few in the Yiddish theater world wanted to perform his dramas. His greatest weakness as a playwright was his inability to visualize his dramas in stageable terms. Like so many visionary leaders of the European avant-garde (Antoine Artaud, Alfred Jarry), Peretz was more effective as a proclaimer of manifestos than as an avant-garde playwright. Hobbled by his theatrical inexperience and lack of dramatic sensibility, Peretz could not actualize the Yiddish art theater that he envisioned. In contrast, the Vilna Troupe drew upon two types of experienced actors: skilled and competent Yiddish theater amateurs and Russian and Polish actors trained in state dramatic academies, bringing years of diverse stage experience to its productions.

In addition, by all accounts Peretz’s personality was not conducive to collaboration. In spite of his theatrical inexperience, Peretz wanted *his* work – both as a theoretician and as a playwright – to stand at the center of the new Yiddish art theater. As such, he struggled to accept artistic input and criticism from others. A dedicated theater circle of younger colleagues, in awe of the mentor and great writer, enabled the persistence of Peretz’s egoism throughout the entire theater campaign. Never once did Peretz admit that he was at fault for the failure of any of his endeavors. Instead, he variously laid blame upon actors, directors, critics, and the dearth of wealthy financial backers. When the production of *Temptation* embarrassed him, it was not his playwriting or directing that was to blame, but the actors who did not properly understand his brilliance. When the Hirschbein Troupe disappointed the Yiddish writers of Warsaw, it was Hirschbein’s direction of the company that was to blame, not Peretz’s mentorship. Finally, when the Literary Society’s theater project ultimately dissolved, Peretz held the bankers of St. Petersburg responsible rather than his own passionate outburst. It would ultimately take a

¹⁷¹ Turkow-Grudber, *Perets der veker*, 48.

company of younger performers committed to a truly collaborative model to enact Peretz's theatrical revolution.

Third, Peretz was never able to precisely articulate exactly what he envisioned for the Yiddish art theater. The term remained somewhat nebulous throughout the entirety of Peretz's theater campaign, and was constantly adapted to fit his needs at any given moment. His conception of Yiddish art theater was constantly in flux even at the most basic level of genre and stylistic approach. He was torn between wanting to emulate the naturalism of Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theater and his interest in the anti-realistic "dream theater" of Strindberg and other avant-garde European theater artists. Peretz's theater campaign was weakened by its leader's struggle to articulate his often contradictory artistic goals. Without a fixed conception of his own goals, Peretz was never able to develop his vision into a fully-fledged movement.

Blame for *shund* likewise shifted constantly to suit Peretz's ever-changing agenda. Turkow-Grudberg compared Peretz's role in the theater campaign to a doctor who sought to assess the "diseases" of the Yiddish theater but "did not always present the same diagnosis."¹⁷² In addition to these inconsistencies over the aims of his campaign, Peretz's approach to the theater in general was full of contradictions. As Turkow-Grudberg wrote in his biography, Peretz carried within him an *internal* conflict about his intended audience for high-art Yiddish culture: "He, the awakener of the masses, bound to the masses, he, who had the ability to ignite and energize the breath of the masses – he was, in essence, inside, of an elite artistic nature, an intellectual aristocrat."¹⁷³ On the one hand, Peretz fervently believed in the idea of elevating Yiddish folk-literature and folk-art. At the same time, deep down he remained the "elite aesthete" of his youth. This tension between Peretz's interest in "the folk" and his intellectual

¹⁷² Turkow-Grudberg, *Perets der veker*, 33.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 29.

elitism was apparent in his continued attendance at *shund* productions, a behavior that deeply troubled the members of his theater circle. Peretz's enjoyment of *shund* stood in direct conflict to his public stance as the defender of "artistic" Yiddish theater. Moreover, Peretz was never able to clearly articulate whether his Yiddish art theater was supposed to be a mass enterprise or the elite province of intellectuals. This question of his intended audience was a central paradox at the heart of Peretz's theatrical endeavor that confused colleagues and opponents alike.

Yet Peretz himself was not entirely at fault. Just as he himself was unclear about his goals for the Yiddish art theater, so too did the members of his theater circle struggle to articulate precisely what it was that they sought. Like their leader, the writers who supported Peretz were never in full agreement about their goals. Instead, they focused on denouncing the *shund* theaters rather than developing a clear platform for the theater campaign. Characteristic of their inattention to setting practical goals for the new Yiddish theater was the fact that neither Peretz nor his supporters ever issued a manifesto. In contrast, the Vilna Troupe and the dozens of Yiddish art theaters that it inspired during the interwar period were goal-oriented companies that outlined a specific aesthetic vision in dozens of articles, interviews, logos, program booklets, and informal manifestos.

Shifting historical forces and contexts also played a major role in shaping both Peretz's failure and the success of the Vilna Troupe. During the years in which Peretz pursued his theater campaign, the Yiddish theater had only recently become a legitimate (i.e. legal) option for writers interested in elevating Jewish culture. Not everyone was convinced. The necessity of a new Jewish theater was not readily apparent, and many writers (like Mendeleyev) refused to get involved. This lack of support was a tremendous disappointment that weakened Peretz's project.

As the following chapter will demonstrate, the idea of a “better Yiddish theater” took on new resonance amidst the poverty, desperation, and chaos of war-torn Vilna.

Finally, Peretz’s theater campaign was weakened by its geographical limitations. His theater campaign occurred in the middle of the great age of Jewish migration, yet his efforts to reform the stage were limited to the small Yiddish-speaking corner of the Russian Empire where Peretz presided as cultural leader. In a period when Eastern European Jews were emigrating from the Russian Empire in unprecedented numbers, the lack of international support for Peretz’s theater campaign weakened his efforts dramatically, especially when like-minded friends and colleagues (like Pinski) emigrated far from Warsaw and became immersed in the local theater disputes of their new homes. Peretz’s theater campaign was firmly based in Warsaw, and it did not travel well. Even Peretz Hirschbein’s company, which was founded in Odessa and toured between the two cities, was fully dependent upon the approval of Peretz and the Warsaw intellectuals for its survival. Moreover, Peretz and his circle did not envision their efforts as having an impact outside the bounds of Warsaw and its environs. Peretz’s campaign was completely disconnected from similar efforts to reform the Yiddish theater in the United States, in spite of Peretz’s ongoing correspondence with Pinski in New York.¹⁷⁴ The similar goals of Yiddish theater activists in Russia and the United States were largely ignored by Peretz and his colleagues, and the efforts of American Yiddish theater reformers were deemed irrelevant to the project of overthrowing *shund* in Warsaw. In contrast to the provincialism of Peretz’s theater

¹⁷⁴ On efforts to reform the Yiddish theater in New York, see Nina Warnke, “Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater: The Cultural Politics of Immigrant Intellectuals and the Yiddish Press, 1887-1910” (Ph.D. Diss., Columbia University, 2001) and Warnke, “The Child Who Wouldn’t Grow Up: Yiddish Theatre and Its Critics” in Berkowitz, *Yiddish Theatre: New Approaches*: 201-216. Warnke considers the establishment of a discourse among American Jewish intellectuals about the Yiddish theater around the turn of the century, which was dominated by the metaphor of the Yiddish theater as a naïve child. These efforts, centered mainly in New York, were almost entirely dissociated from Peretz’s campaign in Warsaw. Unlike Peretz, the New York Yiddish theater critics of this period tended to view naturalism as the ultimate goal of their theater reform.

projects, the Vilna Troupe adopted a transnational orientation to theater-making that enabled the development of a global Yiddish art theater movement.

Yet Peretz's campaign to create a new aesthetic orientation for the Yiddish theater was not without its achievements. It was a *spectacular* failure in the most literal sense, for while the theater campaign failed to achieve any of Peretz's practical goals, it did in fact succeed in starting a conversation among Jewish intellectuals about the future of Yiddish theater.

Unbeknownst to Peretz himself during his lifetime, his efforts laid the groundwork for the emergence of a thriving Yiddish art theater movement just a few years later. Several actors who got their start in the Hirschbein Troupe – most notably, Jacob Ben-Ami, Reuven Vendrof, Leah Naomi, and Lazar Fried – became major figures in the Yiddish art theater scene during the interwar period. Vendrof and Naomi both acted with the Vilna Troupe. Ben-Ami became the founder of New York's Jewish Art Theater in 1919, while Fried and Vendrof were long-standing members of Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater on Second Avenue. Peretz's theater campaign also contributed the writers and critics of his theater circle to the nascent Yiddish art theater. These critics (with the notable exception of A. Vayter, who was murdered in a 1919 pogrom) all made significant contributions to promoting the Vilna Troupe and the Yiddish art theater movement in their reviews and articles published throughout the interwar period.

The influence of Peretz's campaign on the Yiddish art theater movement was by no means limited to the accomplishments of the Hirschbein Troupe or the development of the theater circle. Indeed, Peretz's contribution to the movement also included his vision of a Yiddish art theater that would counter the effects of *shund*. Vilna Troupe co-founder Leib Kadison later recalled how the actors chose one of Peretz's lines from his Philharmonia lecture as their unofficial motto:

We remembered Y.L. Peretz's decree at a meeting in the Philharmonia before an audience of thousands: No Jewish foot shall cross the doorstep of the old Yiddish theater. We will destroy it, and upon its ruins we will build the new Yiddish art theater.¹⁷⁵

Posthumously, Peretz's call to arms became the inspiration for a new generation of idealistic artists to bring his project to fruition. Kadison openly acknowledged his debt to the great writer in his memoirs, telling his readers that the idea of a Yiddish art theater was at least twenty years older than its first company the Vilna Troupe. Theater historians of the interwar period agreed with Kadison in assigning Peretz a founding role in the Yiddish art theater movement. A.H. Bialin considered the members of the Vilna Troupe – and by extension, the entire Yiddish art theater movement – to be “directly or indirectly ignited with the same blaze that the Hirschbein Troupe made widespread.”¹⁷⁶ As Bialin explained:

The Hirschbein Troupe lit a fire that has never been extinguished. There has always remained a yearning, a desire to create an art theater. The Hirschbein Troupe left behind its missionaries. These were the actors of the Troupe, who were later disbursed around the world. They became the preachers and the supporters for a Yiddish art theater.¹⁷⁷

But the influence of Peretz's theater campaign extended far beyond the Hirschbein Troupe, for it was Peretz who single-handedly brought the so-called “theater question” to the attention of Jewish writers and intellectuals. Though Peretz died convinced that his campaign had failed, its effects were in fact lasting. Yiddish theater historian Turkow-Grudberg considered Peretz's campaign a resounding success:

The campaign that had – to the great disappointment of Peretz and his close colleagues – seemed to achieve no concrete success did, in fact, have a tremendous influence on the social atmosphere of the Yiddish theater. It also strengthened the demands that the

¹⁷⁵ Kadison, “Zikhroynes,” 692. Kadison blamed the downfall of Peretz's campaign on the lack of an audience for sophisticated theater during this period.

¹⁷⁶ A. H. Bialin, *Moris Shvarts un der idisher kunst teater* (New York: Biderman, 1934), 10.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

audience was bringing to the theater, and resulted in causing the refinement of the theater practitioner, to the growth of his artistic and social responsibility.¹⁷⁸

Between 1905 and 1911, an aging Peretz sought to revolutionize the Yiddish stage by creating a European-inspired art theater in Yiddish. In his study of Peretz's theatrical activities, Turkow-Grudberg writes that Peretz and the Jewish intellectuals remained trapped on the wrong side of the footlights; unable to create the theater they desperately sought. Peretz spent the last decade of his life consumed with regret:

Disappointment, that the [Yiddish] theater had kept him just outside of the footlights. That is to say: as a theater-consumer with refined tastes, as a person who sought artistically elevated, refined, cultivated theater. Disappointment that came from within the footlights, where Peretz tried [...] as a co-creator of theater, as a producer, as a dramaturg, and once: as the stormer of the moldy theater walls, as a reformer of Yiddish theater, as an organizer of an artistic Yiddish theater.¹⁷⁹

Yet Peretz had pushed intellectuals for the first time in Jewish history to take an active responsibility for the state of their theater. For decades, nineteenth century *maskilic* writers had written closet dramas for small reading groups of fellow intellectuals. Peretz believed that this was no longer enough. The Yiddish writer ought to take *practical* responsibility for the improvement of the Yiddish stage. Peretz explicitly charged writers to go beyond the confines of the drama-as-written to involve themselves more completely in the practice of theater as a collaborative enterprise. In a 1907 interview with a Lemberg Yiddish daily, Peretz made a characteristic plea asking writers to actively work to transform the Yiddish stage:

Yiddish writers have a tremendous responsibility to reform the Yiddish stage. We must tear out from the roots the tragi-comic dance plays which destroy the aesthetic sense of the audience and are a product of the director's caprice. - - - But yes, with the *steady collaborative work and help* of the authors, we can completely remake Yiddish scenic art.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Turkow-Grudberg, *Varshe dos vigele*, 16.

¹⁷⁹ Turkow-Grudberg, *Perets der veker*, 26.

¹⁸⁰ Niger, *Perets zayn lebn*, 424.

For Peretz, not only did Yiddish writers bear a special responsibility for the refinement of the Yiddish theater, but the collaboration of writers and intellectuals in theater practice was a necessary precondition for reform. This approach, while unsuccessful during Peretz's lifetime, ultimately bore fruit in the emergence of a Yiddish art theater movement that was characterized by the active involvement of writers in every stage of the rehearsal and performance process.

After Peretz's theater campaign, the Yiddish theater could no longer be relegated to the outskirts of Jewish intellectual discourse. Instead, the Yiddish stage became a central topic of debate among Jewish writers and leaders. For this new generation of Jewish intellectuals, the Yiddish theater represented an opportunity to demonstrate before the public that Jewish culture could be *highbrow* culture just like any other. Like the priestly theaters of its co-territorial European neighbors, so too would the Yiddish theater become a Temple of Art, a new site of secular allegiance for a sophisticated modern Jewry.

Chapter Two

“Our Art Lives!”: Origins of the Vilna Troupe (1915 – 1919)

“Carry upon your wings this joyful message to the world: Our art lives, the new Yiddish art theater lives!”

- L. Fuks, Lodz, 1918¹⁸¹

“This group of people, young people, Jewish people, being terribly persecuted in the time of the war, being the lowest of the low [...] They decided to do it. Hungry, they thought that by art, you know, they’ll feed themselves with art. Maybe only in the imagination of starving hungry people, you see, can come an idea like this.”

- Joseph Buloff, New York, 1980¹⁸²

The Vilna Troupe was a direct descendent of Peretz’s vision for an intellectually inclined Yiddish stage. Like Peretz, the *Vilner* sought to be the precise antithesis of the popular *shund* theaters, but went farther than their mentor had ever envisioned. Emerging out of the ashes of Peretz’s failed theater campaign, this is the tale of the Vilna Troupe’s Phoenix-like success in achieving a level of global recognition unimagined by their predecessors.

PART ONE: GENESIS

The Vilna Troupe had its roots in the confluence of three distinct historical contexts: 1) A long-standing tradition of highbrow amateur Yiddish theater societies throughout Eastern

¹⁸¹ Written upon the Vilna Troupe’s first visit to Lodz in March 1918. L. Fuks, “Sokol moi yasni” in *Di Vilner in Lodz: literarish zamelheft*, 1918: 6-7. Bela Belarina Papers (RG 574), Box 2, Scrapbook, YIVO.

¹⁸² Joseph Buloff, Interview by Jack Garfein, June 30, 1980, tape recording JSCRC 236 (10), Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Harvard Judaica Division.

Europe; 2) The outbreak of the First World War and the forced dislocation of Jews living near the Russo-German front; and 3) The Russian retreat and the subsequent German occupation of Vilna.

The story of the Vilna Troupe began at the turn of the century with the Shuster family of Kovne (Kaunas), Lithuania. Leib Shuster was a professional house- and sign-painter and a Yiddish theater hobbyist in his spare time. For years, he was content to act, direct, and design scenery for an informal amateur theater club, the Kovne Yiddish Dramatic Society.¹⁸³ Shuster's hobby earned him a local reputation as a thoughtful and inventive director, and his work attracted the attention of prominent playwrights like Peretz Hirschbein and Sholem Asch, who frequently visited the Kadison home for stimulating conversation about the Yiddish stage.

Amateur Yiddish drama organizations like the Shusters' in Kovne had a long and distinguished history in Eastern Europe. The first modern amateur Yiddish theater on record began performing in Lodz in the 1890's.¹⁸⁴ By 1910, there were over 360 such amateur groups throughout Poland, and dozens in Warsaw alone.¹⁸⁵ Collectively, these efforts were known in Yiddish as "*libhober bines*", and their actors as "*libhobers*" – a word that (exactly like the French/English "amateur") could be translated as "those who love the stage." Others deemed the

¹⁸³ Indeed, Leib Shuster was so talented a scenic designer that the prestigious Russian-language State Opera House in Kovne hired him to design their sets. See Luba Kadison, Joseph Buloff, and Irving Genn, *On Stage Off Stage: Memories of a Lifetime in the Yiddish Theatre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Library Judaica Division, 1992), 3.

¹⁸⁴ There may have been isolated productions by organized amateur Yiddish companies as early as 1787, according to Henrich Tsimmerman's article "Di yudishe dramatishe kunst" in *Di Vilner in Lodz*, 8. Still, most scholars date the amateur societies to the 1890's, when they became common in Jewish communities around the world. See Dovid Ber Tirkel's monograph on the history of Hebrew and Yiddish amateur drama societies: *Di yugntlekhe bine: geshikhte fun di idish-hebreishe dramatishe gezelshafn, 1890-1940* (Philadelphia: Hebrew Literature Society, 1940). Tirkel also suggests that the Yiddish groups that emerged during the late 19th century were modeled on the Russian-language amateur drama societies that were also popular during this period.

¹⁸⁵ Sandrow, 212. The most famous amateur clubs in Poland were Hazomir and the Artists' Corner in Warsaw, and The Harp and the Dramatic Art Club in Lodz. See also David S. Lifson, "The History of the Yiddish Art Theatre Movement in New York from 1918 to 1940" (Ph.D. Diss., New York University, 1962), 281.

amateur clubs “*Di yugntlekhe bine*” – “the youthful stage,” referring to the teenagers and young adults who dominated the amateur societies. These *libhober* clubs, with their youthful actors and their focus on “literary” drama, were quite distinct from the professional Yiddish stage. It was not uncommon for amateur Yiddish theater clubs, in spite of tiny budgets and few resources, to stage dramas by the best Yiddish writers (Gordin, Peretz, and Pinski were common favorites) or their own translations of literary European dramas (such as Ibsen, Moliere, and Gorki) while professional companies down the street were more likely to produce popular hits like Lateiner’s *The Jewish Heart*, Hurwitz’s *Mother Love*, or Shomer’s *The Coquettish Ladies*.¹⁸⁶ It was this longstanding tradition of dedicated, high-quality, and serious amateur Yiddish theater that laid the groundwork for the Vilna Troupe’s emergence.

This network of amateur theater clubs across Eastern Europe, and eventually, the United States, functioned as an unofficial school of drama in a culture without dramatic academies or other formal pathways towards theatrical training.¹⁸⁷ There was no formal school where Jews with an interest in theater could train for a career on the Yiddish stage. The amateur drama societies and other informal *libhober* organizations filled this institutional gap by providing a means for aspiring Jewish actors to acquire training, experience, and education that would

¹⁸⁶ See Sandrow’s discussion of amateur Yiddish theater clubs, 211-212. These amateur companies were particularly important in small towns that did not have professional Yiddish theaters of their own, where the amateur groups often were the only permanent source of Yiddish-language entertainment. Joseph Lateiner (1853-1935), (“Professor”) Moyshe Ha-Levi Ish Hurwitz (d. 1910), and Shomer (pseud. Nokhem Meyer Shaikevitch (1849-1905) were three of the most popular Yiddish playwrights of the nineteenth century, and were associated with *shund* by Peretz and his circle. Sandrow, 104-107.

¹⁸⁷ David Lifson makes a similar point in his chapter on the impact of amateur theater clubs on the New York Yiddish art theaters. See Lifson, 278-360. Lifson concludes that the clubs were instrumental in “grooming writers and actors for a better Yiddish theater.” (292) See also Lifson, 282 for a list of the most important amateur clubs in the United States.

otherwise be inaccessible.¹⁸⁸ They also provided valuable opportunities for young playwrights (including many of Peretz's followers) to see their plays staged, which in turn inspiring the development of a new Yiddish dramatic repertoire. Moreover, the amateur Yiddish theater organizations were instrumental in developing an audience base for the future professional Yiddish art theater companies. Amateur drama club performances were social occasions, where actors and spectators built communities around their shared interest in "serious" Yiddish theater. It was not uncommon for amateur actors to invite their audiences to discuss the play and presentation style at length following their performances, and these discussions, in turn, provided the actors with useful feedback on how to improve their craft.¹⁸⁹ The amateur Yiddish theater clubs were thus constantly improving their work based on suggestions from a community of educated and discerning spectators who had a vested interest in helping the actors develop their skills.

The roots of the Vilna Troupe were firmly steeped in this tradition of amateur Yiddish theatrics. Not only did Leib Shuster (later Leib Kadison), the Troupe's founder and primary director, train as a member of an amateur club in Kovne, but many other members of the Vilna Troupe likewise entered the theater as amateurs. Dovid Herman, who would later direct the Troupe's groundbreaking production of *The Dybbuk*, spent several decades working only with amateur groups before turning to the professional Yiddish stage.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, Herman first

¹⁸⁸ Indeed, most of the prominent Yiddish actors, directors and playwrights of the twentieth century, including Maurice Schwartz, Peretz Hirschbein, Leon Kobrin, Dovid Herman, and many others, were active members of amateur Yiddish theater societies for years before turning to the professional stage.

¹⁸⁹ These conversations often turned into lengthy informal debates, in which audience members would declaim their opinions about the production while the actors sat quietly and listened. The audience was the teacher, the actors their students. Tirkel, 38.

¹⁹⁰ Herman organized his first amateur group, the I.L. Peretz Workshop, in 1904 in Warsaw. Between 1904 and 1909, Herman directed for several amateur clubs in Warsaw, including the Hazomir Society and the Dramatic Circle, while maintaining a day job as a high school science and history teacher. Herman temporarily suspended his

introduced many of his characteristic directorial innovations – extensive rehearsals, elimination of the prompter’s booth, working closely with each actor individually – as an amateur director. By the time he came to the Vilna Troupe, Herman had already honed his directing style and could apply a finely tuned approach to the professional stage. Several future Vilna Troupe actors started their careers in 1911 as members of Jacob Ben-Ami’s amateur company, a short-lived offshoot of the Hirschbein Troupe.¹⁹¹ Indeed, several members of the Vilna Troupe (including Kadison) ultimately chose to return to the amateur theater after achieving international acclaim as members of the Vilna Troupe, claiming that the amateur stage that was the true home of “pure” and “honest” theater art.¹⁹²

For aficionados of high-art Yiddish theater in the early decades of the twentieth century, the amateur theater societies were both drama school and experimental laboratory. The Shuster family – Leib, his wife Khane, and their young children – were among the many members of Eastern Europe’s thriving amateur Yiddish theater scene, and they likely would have happily remained anonymous and amateur Yiddish actors had historical forces not intervened and uprooted their comfortable existence in a single instant.

theatrical activities in 1909 when the Russian authorities deemed his political allegiances a threat and he was temporarily forced to flee. He resumed his work in the amateur theater upon returning to Poland in 1910, when he directed the dramatic clubs Harp and Dramatic Art in Lodz and toured the provinces giving lectures about the theater. See Halina Chybowska, “Dovid Herman and the Jewish Theatre in Poland,” *The Polish Review* 4.19 (May 17, 1944): 11-12 and Zylbercweig, 1:634-635.

¹⁹¹ Zylbercweig, 1:184.

¹⁹² After ten years of working as a professional actor-director, Kadison described amateur theater clubs as a site of “honest devotion and love for true dramatic art.” See Leib Kadison, “Amatarn un profesioneln” in *Finfun tsvantsik yor folksbiene*, eds. Yankev Fishman, B. Levin, and B. Stabinovitsh (New York: Posy-Shoulson Press, 1940), 47-48. Joseph Buloff made similar claims about the amateur theater when he left Maurice Schwartz’s Yiddish Art Theater in New York to take over a regional amateur Yiddish theater club in Chicago. See my article, “*Heymish* Modernism: Joseph Buloff’s Chicago Revaluation of the American Yiddish Theatre,” *New England Theatre Journal* 23 (2012): 111-131.

When the Russian Empire entered the First World War and Germany suddenly became an enemy, the Russian government feared that Yiddish-speaking Jews – with their Germanic vernacular language – would turn traitor and aid the opposing side. As the front approached the Russo-German border, the Russian army ordered all Jews in the area – including Kovne – to evacuate within twenty-four hours. With a single decree, tens of thousands of Jews woke up one morning to find themselves refugees.

Forced to leave the city where their ancestors had resided for generations, the Shusters brought their family to nearby Vilna.¹⁹³ Wartime Vilna was already overcrowded and ridden with disease, but there were few nearby cities with major Jewish populations where Jews were permitted to live. Refugees flocked to Vilna by the thousands, most of them penniless, homeless and with few prospects for employment. The Shusters were lucky to find even a meager apartment that could house their family. By the summer of 1915, as the front pressed forward, thousands of homeless and starving refugees wandered the streets of Vilna.¹⁹⁴ By the fall, a total of 22,000 Jewish and 10,000 Christian refugees had entered Vilna seeking asylum.¹⁹⁵

It was this surprise dislocation that was the catalyst for the founding of the Vilna Troupe. While Shuster in Kovne had been content to stage amateur productions as a side endeavor, a lonely and unemployed Shuster in Vilna decided to make his former hobby the center of his new life. Together with a group of fellow migrants and a few members of Vilna's Yiddish literary community, Shuster and his colleagues founded the *Fareyn fun yidishe dramatishe artistn* (known by its acronym, FADA) in the kitchen of the Shusters' cramped apartment.

¹⁹³ The authorities only permitted the Shusters to move to Vilna because they had extended family living in the area. Many of Kovne's Jews were less fortunate. Some were allowed to choose their new homes, while others were deported to Siberia. Kadison, "Zikhroynes," 693.

¹⁹⁴ On the effects of the First World War on Vilna's Jewish population and culture, see Andrew Noble Koss, "World War I and the Remaking of Jewish Vilna, 1914-1918" (Ph.D. Diss., Stanford University, 2010).

¹⁹⁵ Israel Cohen, *Vilna* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1992), 362.

FADA, a ragtag company made up almost entirely of displaced amateurs like Shuster, would later become famous as “the Vilna Troupe.” Its roots, however, were hardly in Vilna at all, but rather, in the border towns from which Jews were forcibly evicted during the war. Like most of the FADA actors, Shuster ironically “became a Vilna resident [*Vilner*] against my own will” only later to become internationally famous as a *Vilner* – a member of the Vilna Troupe.¹⁹⁶ The name was a misnomer – few of the company’s members actually originated from Vilna. As the Vilna Troupe traveled and accumulated new members along the way, even fewer “*Vilner*” would have even the most tangential connection with the city. The Vilna Troupe, then, was not a company of actors from Vilna, but rather, a happenstance grouping of people who came together in the city, many involuntarily, during wartime. The Russian government’s extreme paranoia about the loyalties of their Jewish population, which manifested in the evacuation of tens of thousands of Jews from towns near the German front, was the factor that brought them together.

When Shuster first met the other actors in Vilna and they began to discuss founding a new company, they could not immediately put their plan into action. The Russian commander of Vilna had strictly forbidden Yiddish performances of any sort when the war broke out, causing all of the city’s local Yiddish theater companies to dissolve and their actors to seek work in other cities.¹⁹⁷ The situation in Vilna was declining from day to day. When the Russian army suffered a series of military setbacks, they held Vilna’s Jews to blame and introduced a series of increasingly repressive measures against the city’s Jewish residents. As the German army

¹⁹⁶ Kadison, “Zikhroynes,” 693.

¹⁹⁷ Tumarov, the new Russian wartime commander of Vilna, imposed a series of repressive measures against the local Jewish population in order to demonstrate his loyalty to the regime. Mendl Elkin, “Di Vilner,” *Tealit 4* (February 1924): 16. For a detailed history of Vilna during the First World War, see Cohen, 358-388 and Jacob Wygodski, *In shtetl: zikhroynes fun di okupatsye tsaytn* (Vilna, 1926). On Yiddish theater in Vilna prior to the wartime decree, see Shane Baker, “Beginnings of the Vilna Troupe: Jewish and German Politics in the Formation of a Yiddish Art Theater” (MA Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2002), 10-11 and Elkin, “Di Vilner,” 16. Nokhem Lipovski, the main Vilna Yiddish theater producer, fled to Siberia and later China to escape the war. Another troupe under the direction of S. Genfer also dissolved and its actors fled eastward into the Russian Empire.

approached its borders, the city was under siege for months on end, further exacerbating difficult living conditions.

On the morning of Yom Kippur (September 5, 1915), the Jews of Vilna learned as they walked to synagogue that the Russians had retreated overnight and the Germans had taken over their city. After the oppression they had suffered under Russian rule, Vilna's Jews welcomed the Germans with open arms. Every Jewish institution and organization in the city sent representatives to greet the German army. Even though his theater company was still just an idea, Shuster joined the delegates, billing himself as the representative of Vilna's Yiddish theater.¹⁹⁸

The Germans, in turn, were comparatively receptive to Jewish concerns. At the request of the Jewish community, the German army began publishing daily announcements in Yiddish alongside similar bulletins in German, Polish, and Lithuanian and granted permission for the community to run their own Yiddish-language schools. In a sharp reversal of the language policies enacted by the Russians, the German commanders of Vilna vowed to support Yiddish culture (since it was, after all, merely "German, with many, many unintelligible words," as one army commander quipped, and thus did not pose a threat to the language of their new rulers).¹⁹⁹ Prior to the war, Russian had been the predominant spoken language of Vilna. The occupying German army enacted an elaborate campaign to rid the city of its Russian influences: repainting street signs in German, forbidding Russian-language education, and closing down every Russian theater within the city limits. Vilna's Jews, most of whom spoke fluent Russian, were especially anxious about proving their loyalty to the new regime and made an extra effort to publicly

¹⁹⁸ On the Jewish response to the arrival of the Germans in Vilna, see Kadison, "Zikhroynes," 693.

¹⁹⁹ Community leader Jacob Wygodski recalls having to explain what Yiddish was to the German commander of Vilna. "Ah!," replied the commander, "this must be the language we hear in the streets, that is – German, with many, many unintelligible words." Wygodski, 39-40.

demonstrate their disinterest in Russian culture.²⁰⁰ So long as the Jewish population was committed to helping them eradicate Russian from the streets of Vilna, the German army was willing to grant permission for a wide range of Yiddish cultural activities – including Yiddish theater.

The German occupation of Vilna brought a theatrical vacuum to what had always been an artistically vibrant city. Between the departure of the Yiddish theater companies under Russian rule and the strict prohibition against Russian-language performances under German occupation, there was not a single theater left in Vilna. The German army tried to fill the void by inviting guest artists from Berlin. Still, these visiting performers catered primarily to the German soldiers, not the Vilna locals who had no entertainment of their own. Against the backdrop of this theatrical void, Shuster and his colleagues saw an opportunity to turn their dream of founding a new Yiddish theater into a reality.²⁰¹

Their first task was to secure permission from the German military commanders. With the help of community leaders from the Jewish Aid Committee and sympathetic German-Jewish officers, Shuster and Alexander Orliuk, a local-born actor with experience on both the amateur Yiddish and professional Russian stages and a driving force behind the project, managed to secure a private meeting with the new German commander of Vilna, who responded to their proposition with incredulity.

He looked at us as though we were mad. His “*Waaas!?*” scared us half to death. He led us to the window and showed us: “*Sehen Sie meine Herren!* My soldiers roam about the streets without a place to live, all of the local representatives have come to ask us to help

²⁰⁰Some Vilna Jewish storeowners, fearing a Russian return to Vilna, simply added German to their Russian-language signs, just in case. Wygodski, 36-41.

²⁰¹ Alexander Azro later claimed that the idea of founding a Yiddish art theater in Vilna was originally his, and that he had begun to discuss these plans with Sonia Alomis (who later became his wife) when they were still teenagers. See Azro, “*Dos umfargeslekhe: bletlekh zikhroynes fun unzer sheyn maysele ‘Vilner trupe,’*” Alexander Azro and Sonia Alomis Papers (RG 729), Box 1, Folder 3, YIVO. Still, it was not until after Shuster and the other refugees arrived that a plan was put into motion.

the downtrodden and starving masses, and you come to spin me some nonsense about a Yiddish theater?”

We were a little ashamed, but we quickly came to our senses and explained to him in high German [*Hochdeutsch*] that the local Jewish population was starving just as much for a theater as for bread.²⁰²

Shuster and Orliuk’s new Yiddish theater, then, was to serve a function even more important than physical nourishment: a kind of spiritual and moral sustenance for a traumatized community. They envisioned a theater that would unite the thousands of dislocated Jewish refugees that inhabited the city into a cohesive community. Before the war, Vilna had been known for its rich Jewish culture, earning the city the nickname “*Yerusholayim d’Lite*” (“Jerusalem of Lithuania”).²⁰³ But the city’s notoriously vibrant Jewish community began to falter when Vilna’s greatest artists, scholars, and writers, along with most Jews of means and a full third of the Jewish population, fled the overcrowded city just as the flood of homeless refugees arrived. Shuster and Orliuk hoped that their theater might return some of Vilna’s former glory and bring hope to the starving Jewish refugees that made up a sizable portion of the city’s population.

To Shuster’s surprise, his speech had a decided impact on the German commander. The next day, the German press published a notice that the occupying army had graciously decided to allow Yiddish theater, which had been unfairly forbidden by the oppressive Russian regime. As a

²⁰² Kadison, “Zikhroynes,” 693. At the time, Shuster and his colleagues were not entirely certain that the Jewish population would have agreed with them (“If only it were true!” he added in his memoirs). Jacob Wygodski recalled a similar encounter with a German officer over FADA’s founding in *his* memoirs. When Wygodski asked Baron von Stolzenberg, an army administrator, to help him secure permission for a Yiddish theater in Vilna, the Baron replied “So, Herr Doctor! The heroic blood of our soldiers flows just outside of Vilna, and you want to play theater!” Wygodski, 43.

²⁰³ For a historical overview of why 18th century Jews began to refer to Vilna as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania,” see Leyzer Ran, *Vilna, Jerusalem of Lithuania*, 4th Annual Avrom-Nokhem Stencil Lecture in Yiddish Studies (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, 1987).

publicity maneuver, this decree was effective in winning the confidence of Vilna Jewry, who were now certain that the German occupiers were a decided improvement over Russian rule.²⁰⁴

Feeling as though they had won the lottery, Shuster, Orliuk, and fellow amateur actor Jacob Sherman began to seek out every aspiring Jewish actor they could find in occupied Vilna. Most of these early recruits were amateurs, enlisted from the best pre-war amateur Yiddish theater societies in Vilna and the surrounding communities. Some had no experience at all. A few were experienced Jewish-Russian actors, graduates of prestigious Russian drama schools, who found themselves stranded in a German-occupied Vilna where performing in Russian was strictly forbidden. Finally, Shuster and Orliuk recruited Matisyahu Kovalski, the only professional Yiddish actor left in war-torn Vilna. Young Kovalski, at the age of 21, was by far the most experienced Yiddish performer among them. Indeed, the members of FADA could hardly have been more different. Most of the actors had no formal training or experience, while others had performed extensively in professional companies in Russian. A few had been raised with a traditional Jewish *cheder* education, while others had attended the state-run Russian *gymnasia* or one of Vilna's secular Yiddishist or Bundist schools.²⁰⁵ Even language was no equalizer: while most of the company's members were natively fluent in Yiddish, several of the former Russian actors spoke no Yiddish at all and had to learn the language as beginners. For months, they were limited to non-speaking roles while they studied their new language.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Not everyone was pleased about this development. Some Vilna Jews complained publicly in letters to the editor. "We don't have bread, so why on earth do they give us theater?" wrote one complainant. However, these types of complaints disappeared once FADA began performing. See Kadison, "Zikhroynes," 693.

²⁰⁵ Chaim Shniur, "Zikhroynes vegn der Vilner trupe," Bella Bellarina Papers (RG 574), Box 4, 8. YIVO.

²⁰⁶ The actors who initially had the most difficulty with Yiddish included Paula Valter (*née* Schroeder), who had previously performed with the Belyayev Russian troupe and knew virtually no Yiddish at all, and Yehudis Lares (*née* Rivke Chanenzon), whose Yiddish was very much out of practice after years performing and speaking exclusively in Russian. Both actresses would later have starring roles in major Vilna Troupe productions. See "Appendix A: Biographies of the Vilner" in Baker, 46-51.

Ironically, it was these very actors who had the most formal theatrical training who initially hobbled the company because of their lack of Yiddish fluency. Had the war not taken away their Russian theater livelihood, many of the founding members of the company might have never performed on the Yiddish stage at all. Only two actors, Orliuk and Tankhus, bridged the divide between the company's twin organizational and cultural heritages: between amateur and professional, and between Yiddish and Russian.

These were decidedly less than ideal conditions for the founding of a new Yiddish theater company: a motley group of mostly untrained actors without even a common language to bind them. The actors could not claim a shared geographical origin or even regional dialect, as most were neither *Vilner* nor Litvaks. Adding to the chaos, the political status of the company was anything but secure. Right away, virtually all of the actors adopted stage names, just in case the Russians might suddenly take back Vilna and try to punish them for breaking the wartime Yiddish theater ban. Alexander Orliuk became Alexander Azro, Noyekh Bushlewicz became Noah Nachbush, and Leib Shuster and his family became the Kadisons.

Birth Name	Stage Name	Place of Origin	Prior Theater Experience
?	A. Lerer		Amateur Yiddish
Alexander Orliuk	Alexander Azro	Vilna	Amateur Yiddish & Prof. Russian
Frida Blumental		Vilna	Amateur Yiddish
Leib Shuster	Leib Kadison	Kovne	Amateur Yiddish
Matisyahu Koval	Mateus / Matisyahu Kovalski		Professional Yiddish
Noyekh Bushlewicz	Noyekh Nakhbush	Vilna	Amateur Yiddish
P. Kalen			Amateur Yiddish
P. Rivkina			Amateur Yiddish
Paula Shroder	Paula Valter	Riga	Professional Russian
Rivke Chanenzon	Yehudis Lares	Vilna	Professional Russian
Shneyer-Chaim Gamerow	Chaim Shniur	Osvye (Belorussia)	Amateur Yiddish
Sholem Tankhus	Sholem Tanin	Kovne	Amateur Yiddish & Prof. Russian
Sonia Lubotzki	Sonia Alomis	Vilna	Amateur Yiddish, Russian training
Yankev Sherman	Hamacabi	Libave (Latvia)	Amateur Yiddish

Figure 1: Actors of the Original Vilna Troupe, 1915

Their company too would disappear immediately should the Russians return, the actors agreed. At the founding moment of the company that would ultimately become the Vilna Troupe, the actors envisioned FADA, like their pseudonyms, as ephemeral and temporary. Only under a particular set of political conditions – the defeat of the Russians, the continued occupation of the Germans, the end of the war – could FADA, the Kadisons, Azro, Nachbush, and Lares continue to exist as without vanishing to ensure their own safety. In the fall of 1915, this precise set of circumstances seemed far from likely.

The original name of the fledgling company (“Federation of Yiddish Dramatic Actors (FADA) Under the Direction of Mateus Kovalski”) signified another of the company’s groundbreaking innovations: the merging of amateur and professional Yiddish theatrical traditions. In fact, this fusion of amateur and professional was a site of tremendous tension within the nascent troupe. Originally, Kadison and Azro had envisioned forming an umbrella organization for every amateur Yiddish theater artist in the city that would operate as both a theater company and a quasi-union.²⁰⁷ Yet with the inclusion of professional actors from the Russian and Yiddish stages, the original plan of a strictly amateur federation was abandoned in favor of a company that would bring amateur and professional actors together in a single, cohesive ensemble. Indeed, it was this *ensemble*-based approach, rather than the strengths of any of the individual actors themselves, that would become the company’s defining hallmark.

Twenty-one-year-old Kovalski, as the only professional Yiddish actor among them, was officially charged with the direction of the company. But his leadership was in name alone: Kovalski never directed a single FADA production, and the memoirs of other FADA actors scarcely even mention his name. Kovalski’s nominal positioning as the artistic director did not

²⁰⁷ Luba Kadison recalls that an umbrella amateur organization was her father and Azro’s original aim when they began planning the company. Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Papers Collection 3, Folder LK/Lecture/Vilna Troupe, July 2, 1985, 4, Harvard Judaica Division.

reflect the reality of the company's organizational structure, but rather, was a careful gesture designed to invoke the legitimacy of the professional stage.

While in Yiddish the amateur stage was known for its dedicated actor-intellectuals and the high literary quality of its productions, the most influential theaters in European culture during this period were both high-art *and* professional. The Independent Theater, Freie Bühne, and Reinhardt's Deutsches Theater were all major influences for Kadison, Azro, and the original members of FADA. Another influence, André Antoine's Théâtre Libre, offered a historical precedent for forward-thinking amateurs taking the professional European theater world by storm.²⁰⁸ However, the Independent Theater movement inspired by the Théâtre Libre's productions was firmly entrenched as a *professional* movement by 1915. The Moscow Art Theater, FADA's primary influence, provided an even more relevant precedent for the ambitious amateurs in Vilna. Stanislavsky, idolized by Kadison and Azro alike, had begun his own career as a serious-minded amateur actor, and it was in fact a similar union of amateur and professional Russian actors in the Society of Art and Literature that first inspired him to depart from the clichés of conventional acting style and seek a novel approach. Although its roots were steeped in amateur theatrics, the Moscow Art Theater quickly morphed into a professional company.

For aspiring Jewish actors, however, the choice to define themselves as amateur or professional carried even larger stakes in a theater tradition that had been historically de-legitimized by Jews and non-Jews alike. For the founders of FADA, who sought to make a basic

²⁰⁸ Théâtre Libre was founded in 1887 when Antoine suggested to his amateur theater group, the *Cercle Galois*, that they present an evening of plays by new playwrights. The literary repertoire and artistic seriousness of the company immediately attracted the attention of prominent admirers, among them Emile Zola and his literary circle, and spurred the establishment of dozens of similarly oriented theaters ("independent theaters") throughout Europe. While Théâtre Libre quickly became a quasi-professional company when Antoine quit his job as a clerk in the Paris Gas Company and became a full-time theater practitioner, the company continued to feature primarily amateur actors throughout its tenure. On Antoine and the Théâtre Libre, see André Antoine, *Mes Souvenirs sur le Théâtre-Libre* (Paris: A. Fayard, 1921) and Patricia Bohrn, *Andre Antoine und sein Théâtre Libre: eine spezifische Ausformung des naturalistischen Theaters* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).

claim for the very legitimacy of the Yiddish theater within the larger context of mainstream European culture, the designation “professional” added an important air of authenticity to their project. Thus even as FADA sought to merge amateur and professional traditions into a new kind of Yiddish theater, its founders – themselves amateurs – strategically tried to position the nascent company as strictly professional.²⁰⁹ In nominally placing the company under Kovalski’s direction, FADA created an alternative genealogy for the company that emphasized the professional side of their dual heritage, presenting a fictional narrative that overshadowed the company’s mostly amateur origins. In highlighting the single seasoned Yiddish theater professional among them rather than the untrained amateurs or Russian-language performers that made up the majority of the company, FADA downplayed its own contribution in fusing two distinct Yiddish theater traditions. Instead, the company located its lineage squarely within a European tradition of high-art *and* professional theater companies.

The decision to emphasize Kovalski’s fictionalized role at the artistic helm of FADA stood in stark contrast to the company’s collaborative organizational structure and distinctive ensemble style. FADA was organized on a cooperative model in which each actor had equal voting privileges in all matters of repertoire, casting, rehearsal process, and artistic direction. Actors were selected on a rotating basis to join a leadership committee responsible for guiding major company decisions.²¹⁰ In reality, however, individual members of FADA soon took on distinct semi-permanent roles. Kadison, as the most experienced director and the most skilled visual artist among them, was almost always chosen by the committee to direct the productions

²⁰⁹ While Kadison’s roots were entirely in the amateur Yiddish theater tradition, Azro had spent several years performing as a professional Russian actor with the Kiev-based theater company Solovtsov. However, he had abandoned his career as a Russian actor by 1912 in favor of returning to Vilna and performing in the amateur Yiddish societies. See Azro, “Dos umfargeslekhe.”

²¹⁰ The first members of this committee were Kadison, Kovalski, Shniur, Azro, and Mordechai Mazo, the company’s business manager. On the membership and organizational structure of FADA, see Zylbercweig, 1: 704-717.

and to design and build all of FADA's sets. Azro, in turn, took over the leadership of the actors. He coached members with less stage experience on their acting style and diction and worked with the Russian-speakers to improve their fluency in Yiddish. With his outsized influence among the company members, it was no coincidence that Azro's sweetheart, Sonia Alomis, was frequently selected by the artistic committee to play the female leads. Soon, the committee brought in Mordechai Mazo, a former schoolteacher and fencer known for his skills as a community organizer, to serve as the company's business manager. A highly personable and savvy leader with a deeply-rooted knowledge of Vilna's Jewish community, Mazo's influence on FADA far exceeded his nominal role as business manager, and he soon came to be known as one of the key figures guiding the young company.²¹¹

Still, although FADA's artistic choices were more or less controlled by a few key individuals (usually Kadison, Azro, and Mazo, with occasional additions or substitutions), this leadership was dedicated to designing performances around the ensemble. Each and every actor (and each one of their characters, no matter how small the part) was to be equally significant to each production and to the company as a whole. This kind of ensemble-based company represented a new concept for a stage tradition that had traditionally been dominated by talented, vocal, and –often – highly egotistical star performers in what was colloquially known as the “star system.”²¹² FADA challenged this entrenched model with a collective approach to the theater that matched the socialist politics of its members. Yet as FADA actor Chaim Shniur recalled, the

²¹¹ At 36, Mazo was also 10 to 15 years older than most of the actors. His age may have also contributed to his authoritative role. If Kadison was “the soul” [*neshome*] of the Vilna Troupe,” Turkow-Grudberg noted in his history of Yiddish theater in Poland, Mazo was “the brains” [*der kop*]” behind the operation. Yitskhok Turkow-Grudberg, *Yidish teater in Polyn* (Warsaw: Yidish Bukh, 1951), 46.

²¹² On the star system, see Sandrow, 254 and 295. Sandrow notes: “The star system tended to cheapen the quality of acting – indeed, the playwright Osip Dimov ironically summed up a friend's career: ‘He used to be a good actor, poor fellow, but now he's just a star.’ Plays were routinely rewritten to suit the ambitions and desires of their stars, however misguided. The star system also effectively discouraged younger performers from working on the professional Yiddish stage, as it was extremely difficult to break in.

company had little choice but to operate as on a collective basis.²¹³ It was the only approach that made sense. With more than half of the troupe made up of untested amateurs and the rest struggling to master basic Yiddish grammar, the actors relied upon one another to fill in the gaps in their training and knowledge. There was nobody with enough authority to guide the company according to his or her whims. Individually, many of the actors struggled to overcome the lacunae of their linguistic and artistic backgrounds; collectively, they made an impressively talented ensemble.

FADA's members voted on the central tenets of their company in discussions around the Kadisons' kitchen table. Leib's wife Khane would distribute to each actor their only meal of the day – a single boiled potato – and the actors would carry on debates about how to create a Yiddish art theater late into the evening. "In those days, a potato was a luxury," Luba Kadison recalled of their meetings, but it was "under these conditions that our idealism developed."²¹⁴ Ultimately, the actors agreed on a set of goals. The ensemble system was to be the hallmark of their distinctive style. Their repertoire would be chosen from only the most highly regarded Yiddish authors. If there were not enough suitably high-quality Yiddish plays for a season, they agreed that they would translate Russian and European plays to fill the gap. Since FADA's overarching goal was to stage a repertoire that would elevate the artistic level of the Yiddish theater, the actors decided that the perceived *literary* value of the repertoire was more important than whether or not the plays were written by Yiddish playwrights or dealt with Jewish themes. Moreover, every member of the company would be responsible for maintaining his or her own

²¹³ According to Shniur: "With such a group, with this equal gathering of strengths, the leadership and management naturally had to be collective. Simply because we lacked an artistic personality who would, with their authority, have the confidence of everyone and who would give the entire endeavor a distinct color, an expressive character." Shniur, "On a nomen: a bintl zikhroynes vegn der Vilner Trupe," *Literarishe bleter*, 25 August 1929, 661.

²¹⁴ Luba Kadison, Interviewed by Leah Shlanger for Kol Yisrael, 1987. Tape Recording JSCRC 236 (1). Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Harvard Judaica Division.

public image as an educated intellectual. Azro was particularly stubborn on this point, swearing that no actor would be granted a speaking role until he or she could prove that they could speak, read, *and* write a proper literary Yiddish. A formal demonstration of one's knowledge of modern Yiddish literature before the entire company was required to be eligible for the best parts. The actors also decided on a repertory model, in which they would perform a rotating selection from their literary repertoire each week. Finally, the company members agreed upon a rigorous rehearsal process, in which no play would be performed in public until its director deemed the production perfect. Each of these aims was by itself a major innovation; taken together, FADA's goals constituted a complete overthrow of traditional Yiddish performance style.

When Kadison, Azro, and Sherman began their discussions, they explicitly aligned themselves with earlier theater reformers like Peretz, Ben-Ami, and Hirschbein. But while each of these figures had tried to implement some innovations, no one had ever before attempted such an extensive reform of the Yiddish stage. From its very inception, FADA was intended to be the forerunner of a new kind of Yiddish theater that would no longer be an embarrassment to Jewish intellectuals and that would cater to an educated audience. Moreover, the founders of FADA hoped that their venture would be so successful that it would also attract the Russian and European intelligentsia. FADA thus also modeled its artistic principles on the reforms of influential directors in the non-Yiddish theater world, including Max Reinhardt, Gordon Craig, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and, perhaps most directly, Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theater.²¹⁵

Though the company drew from a range of European avant-garde and art theater models, the Russian theater – and in particular, the ensemble model of the Moscow Art Theater – was the *dominant* influence on FADA's early work. Nearly every member of FADA frequently attended

²¹⁵ Of course, many of those whom the FADA founders idolized (including Reinhardt and Meyerhold) were themselves of Jewish descent.

the Russian theater and, like so many Russian theatergoers of the period, idolized the Moscow Art Theater above all other companies. Indeed, the memoirs of the original FADA members abound with comparisons between the Moscow Art Theater and their own early work. As Azro described the company's initial aims:

To break with the old Yiddish theater of yesterday and erect a new and authentic art theater. But this pursuit required knowledge of theater art, and the Vilna Troupe found it in a direction rooted in the artistic ideology of Stanislavsky's Art Theater in Moscow, and in a similar company, Solovtsov's Theater in Kiev...²¹⁶

Azro's memoir is typical in its wholehearted embrace of Russian theatrical models as authentic and forward-thinking in contrast to the outdated styles of the Yiddish *shund* stage. The future of the Yiddish theater, the site of its pending authenticity, is located not within Jewish culture itself but in the aesthetic imagination of the *Russian* stage.

For the FADA actors, then, the very authenticity of their company depended on how closely their work could resemble that of the Moscow Art Theater. In the company's early years, the actors thus strove to imitate Stanislavsky and his company in every last detail. Late night discussions after rehearsals focused on how to best emulate the Art Theater's ensemble techniques, stylistic innovations, training, repertory system, and literary repertoire. The Moscow Art Theater was *the* central reference point for the young company in these early years. When FADA members discussed what it meant to create an "art theater" in Yiddish, they were understood by the others to be implicitly talking about Stanislavsky.

At times, the Yiddish actors felt at a distinct disadvantage in comparison with their Russian idols. "Stanislavsky's troupe was educated by the best Russian playwrights, while the

²¹⁶ Alexander Azro, "Dos iz geven lang tsurik... ikh gedenk vos dos iz geven." Azro and Alomis Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, 5, YIVO. On the Solovtsov theater, see Mayhill C. Fowler, "'A Theatrical Mecca': The Stages of Kyiv in 1907" in *Modernism in Kyiv: Jubilant Experimentation*, eds. Irena R. Makaryk and Virlana Tkacz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 29-34. Alexander Azro performed for several years as a member of the Solovtsov ensemble.

Vilna Troupe educated the ‘best’ Yiddish playwrights,” lamented FADA member Chaim Shniur, “The Muscovites were brought up on the best theaters of their era. It was not the fault of the *Vilner* that the ‘best’ Yiddish theaters didn’t exist [...] on the Yiddish stage there were many good actors, but there was no good theater – for good acting does not equal good theater.”²¹⁷ The Moscow Art Theater had a literary establishment prepared to assist in the creation of an art theater and dozens of reputable Russian theater companies to draw upon for inspiration and collaboration. The members of FADA, in contrast, were on their own. It was their task not only to create a Yiddish art theater, but also to develop the necessary institutional infrastructure, critical apparatus, and audience base from the ground up. The members of FADA thus envisioned themselves as simultaneously embodying two distinct roles. As Yiddish culture builders, they would play a crucial role in the development of a modern Jewish culture by bringing a Russo-European model of high-art theater to the Jewish intelligentsia and, ultimately, the masses. At the same time, as educators of Jewish writers and community leaders, they would teach their colleagues all that they had learned from studying the Russian stage. One function was almost never mentioned: that of entertainment. The members of FADA sought to create a Yiddish theater that would be the precise opposite of *shund* and would bring “art” to the Yiddish stage. Entertainment was beside the point.

While FADA was explicitly fashioned after a Russo-European model, the company departed from the modernist enterprises of its non-Jewish counterparts in one major way: the actors never wrote an official manifesto outlining their artistic program. By 1915, the modernist manifesto was established as a staple of the European avant-garde. Indeed, these manifestos were

²¹⁷ Shniur, “Zikhroynes,” 17.

a genre that was remarkably consistent in structure, key terms, and metaphors, as up-and-coming artists diligently studied past manifestos before crafting their own.²¹⁸ The manifesto was an important site of organizational cohesion for most European artistic movements during this period. For European artists in the early twentieth century, it was the manifesto that defined – and more often than not, preceded – the movement.

Why did FADA embrace the artistic goals of Europe's theaters without writing a manifesto? FADA's founders did not appear to reflect on this question at any length. If we locate FADA/the Vilna Troupe within the context of other European avant-garde artistic movements of the early twentieth century, as this dissertation suggests, the lack of an official written manifesto for the Vilna Troupe is striking. If Yiddish theater artists sought to position their work within a broader trajectory of European theatrical modernism, the members of FADA most certainly did, why would they neglect to produce a founding document modeled upon the manifestos of their non-Jewish counterparts? Symbolism, Futurism, Vorticism, Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism, and Artaud's Theater of Cruelty may have represented decidedly different artistic ideas, but they were all united in their dedication to the manifesto as a core component of developing and promoting an avant-garde artistic program.²¹⁹ Within this context, the absence of a formal FADA manifesto is striking. Perhaps Yiddish actors were wary of aligning themselves with the politically explosive – and, within a Jewish context of constant political instability, potentially

²¹⁸ European artistic manifestos of this period focused on the liberation of the symbol, the tension between the machine and the natural world, and a complete and abrupt departure from traditional notions of art – all of which the Vilna Troupe might have employed in its own manifesto, had its members written one.

²¹⁹ The Expressionists, who never authored an official manifesto, were the only major exception among early twentieth-century European artistic movements. The original avant-garde artistic manifesto, The Symbolist Manifesto, was published by Jean Moréas in *Le Figaro* in 1886. An explosion of artistic manifestos soon followed, including: the Futurist Manifesto in 1909, the Vorticist Manifesto in 1914, the Dada Manifesto in 1916, the Surrealist Manifesto in 1924, the Constructivist Manifesto in 1921, and Antonin Artaud's first Theater of Cruelty Manifesto in 1932. Many artists within these movements wrote and adopted dozens of corollary manifestos with specific art forms or audiences in mind. The Futurists alone authored approximately 17 discrete manifestos. On the origins of the manifesto and the explicitly political resonances of the genre, see Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

dangerous – genre of the artistic manifesto and preferred a seemingly apolitical artistic movement. More likely, the permanent and severe economic woes, combined with the Vilna Troupe's lack of a stable geographical base, its reliance on constant travel, and the actors' attendant lack of leisure time, may have made the production, publication, and dissemination of a formal manifesto a daunting task. Still, neither of these explanations completely accounts for the lack of an identifiable manifesto among the members of FADA, who hoped to align their work with the European avant-garde. For the theater historian steeped in a narrative of modern artistic movements dominated by the ubiquity of the manifesto, this absence requires an explanation.

Instead of writing a manifesto, FADA's leaders focused their attention on crafting a logo that would encapsulate the company's orientation and aims, a kind of visual mission statement. Both Kadison and Azro were visual artists long before they considered a stage career. Both men had trained professionally as painters, while neither had ever received any official training in acting, directing, or stagecraft. Azro had studied painting in Kiev before his brief career as a professional Russian actor, while Kadison first encountered the theater as a set painter for the Russian theaters of Kovne. Thus while the founders of the company were ideologically committed to Peretz's vision of a *literary* Yiddish theater, their approach to theater art was profoundly *visually* inflected. Their goal was not merely to stage literary dramas, as Peretz had sought, but rather to take high quality dramas and render them upon the stage three-dimensionally. Unlike their predecessors Peretz and Hirschbein, the original members of FADA were not professional writers with a side interest in theater, but rather avid theatergoers for whom the appeal of literary Yiddish drama had more to do with its stage viability than its literary reception. FADA's visual orientation would later enable the company to embrace the expressionist and modernist theatricality that ultimately became its trademark. Initially, however,

we can see FADA's preference for visual modes of representation in its meticulously designed logo that served the company's brand, manifesto, and mission statement.



*Figure 2: Logo From an Early FADA Program
Harvard Library Judaica Division*

This logo, designed jointly by Kadison and Azro and dated 1915, is the first recorded document referring to FADA's existence and may even have predated the official founding of the company.²²⁰ The logo features a picture-frame proscenium stage with Yiddish letters spelling out "FADA" emblazoned at the top. The curtains are partially drawn back to reveal a wooden stage lit not with ordinary gas or electric footlights, but a row of seven ancient lamps each with a

²²⁰ The original drawing is preserved in Leib Kadison's personal archive (RG 729), Box 2, Scenic Projects, YIVO. True to his training as a visual artist, Kadison's archive contains far more visual material (i.e. set and program designs, sketches, photographs, etc.) than textual material.

single burning flame. These seven lamps evoke the quintessential symbol of Judaism, the seven-branched Menorah that stood before the ark of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem.²²¹ The presence of these seven lamps connects FADA's new Yiddish theater to the Temple; according to the company's analogy, both are holy spaces for the Jewish people. The presence of a Menorah, the unofficial symbol of Jewish peoplehood, at the base of the stage makes an implicit argument for the centrality of the Yiddish theater to the national project. Beyond the Menorah-like footlights, the stage turns into an open road leading to a rising sun – the future. The flat platform of the stage becomes a ramp that rises upward, elevating the audience and the actors to new heights. Come to the Yiddish theater, the logo suggests, and join us en route to the future of Jewish culture.

In place of a written manifesto, FADA's logo illustrates the company's primary aims in visual terms. The Menorah conveys the national import of the theater for Jewish culture and the idea of the theater as a sacred space for Jewish theater art. The upward tilt of the stage towards the sun echoes the imagery of heightening and vertical ascent that was often associated with the troupe. As one Vilna intellectual wrote, the original goal of the company was to create "a permanent Yiddish theater, that will attempt to *elevate* Jewish dramatic art to a certain height."²²² This could only be accomplished by counteracting the traditionally "low" position of the Yiddish *shund* theater with the kind of company associated in the minds of European intellectuals with the very highest form of theater art: an "art theater." By raising the artistic level of the Yiddish theater, FADA sought to elevate not only the Yiddish stage, but also the entirety of modern

²²¹ According to the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 25:31-40) God revealed the design for the Menorah to Moses and instructed him to light the lamp every morning before the ark. Representations of the Menorah date back to the 1st century, most famously, on the Arch of Titus, which depicts the conquering Romans removing the Menorah from Jerusalem. The seven-branched candelabrum also appeared frequently on tombs and monuments as a symbol for the survival of the Jewish people.

²²² Zalmen Reyzen, "Der yidisher teater in Vilna" in *Vilner zamelbukh*, ed. Tsemakh Shabad, vol. 2 (Vilna: M. Rosental, 1918), 165.

Jewish culture. Their Yiddish theater that would publicly demonstrate – to Vilna Jewry, to their Gentile neighbors, and to the occupying German army – that Yiddish culture deserved a place at the table of modern European culture.

In the fall of 1915, FADA's leadership selected their first play: Sholem Asch's 1911 comedy *Der landsman* [*The Countryman*]. Set in New York, *Der landsman* tells the story of an upwardly mobile Jewish American immigrant named Jack (né Yankl) Levi whose wife has recently died and has decided to remarry an acculturated high-society German Jewish woman. But at the end of the first act, Jack gets a surprise visit from an elderly Eastern European Jew and his wife who have just arrived in America. It is Moyshe and Blume, the couple from Jack/Yankl's *shtetl* who raised him after his parents died, and they have brought him his old fiancée Sheyndele, whom Jack had abandoned when he originally decided to come to America to seek his fortune. Sheyndele is now widowed, and has a daughter of her own, Feygele, who is the exact same age that Sheyndele had been when Jack abandoned her. When his German-Jewish in-laws-to-be make fun of his *shtetl* kin and former fiancée, Jack breaks off the engagement and decides to marry Feygele instead. Everyone is thrilled, and it is a happy ending. In *Der landsman*, Old World Jewish authenticity ultimately trumps high society New World ambitions.

As a play about an acculturated Jew choosing to return to his true Jewish identity and culture, *Der landsman* was a fitting choice for FADA's first play. But it was also an extremely bold selection under the circumstances. After all, Jack's rejection of snobbish non-Jewish culture was, in fact, an explicit rejection of *German* culture, and FADA was planning to perform this play under *German* military occupation before an audience largely made up of *German* soldiers. In *Der landsman*, "German" was synonymous with "foreign." The Germans in attendance,

Kadison and Azro must have reasoned, would only understand a *portion* of the dialogue and would perhaps not pick up on the full extent of the play's anti-German sentiments. But the Jews in the audience would hear their message loud and clear: even under German occupation, FADA would not be complicit in the army's project to assimilate Vilna's Jews into German culture. *Der landsman* was thus a coded declaration of FADA's independence from the city's German military overlords, buried beneath the surface humor of an otherwise heartwarming domestic comedy.

The actors elected Kadison to direct the first production. Rehearsals were held at night in the Kadison's living room, and often lasted until dawn. Legend has it that Kadison rehearsed the company at this breakneck pace for forty nights, with scarcely a day off.²²³ Many of the actors arrived at rehearsals on the verge of starvation, struggling to maintain their energy after a long workday without sustenance. Still, the actors respected Kadison's grueling rehearsal schedule and faithfully attended night after night, with or without food.

Once the rehearsal process was underway, Kadison began to seek an adequate performance space. This was no simple task, as the German army had requisitioned every decent theater building in the city. Yet had the Germans never occupied Vilna, the company still would have struggled to find a suitable performance space since, as a rule, the managers of Vilna's best theater buildings did not allow Jews to perform on their stages. Vilna's Yiddish theaters had traditionally performed in two locations on the outskirts of the city: one a small and makeshift theater located in a Jewish cafeteria, and the other a dilapidated former circus building.²²⁴ These buildings were also repurposed when the Germans occupied Vilna. Deeming both stages unfit for visiting German performers, the army converted the cafeteria theater into soldiers' quarters and

²²³ Kadison, Buloff, and Genn, 8.

²²⁴ Kadison, "Zikhroynes," 772. This theater was located on Novigorod Street and was known as the Philharmonia.

the circus theater into a stable for military horses. Furniture and sets from the old Yiddish theater productions were burned to heat the converted buildings.

At the bequest of the horrified Jewish owner of the circus building, Kadison managed to convince the Germans to move the horses elsewhere and let him have the building for FADA. The building's owner was so relieved at the departure of the horses that he rented the space to Kadison for free. Overjoyed, the actors entered their new home only to discover thick layers of dust mired in horse dung between the boards of the stage, an auditorium littered with broken chairs and half-burnt set pieces, footlights with broken lamps and chewed-up electrical wires, and layers of ice in every corner from buckets of water left behind when the army departed and turned off the heat.²²⁵ The actors scrubbed the boards and hauled furniture during rehearsal breaks. In his memoirs, Kadison recalled his disappointment upon finding the building that was supposed to be his "Jewish Temple of Art" (*yidische kunst-templ*) corrupted into a horse stable. Like the ancient Maccabees restoring the Temple in Jerusalem to its former glory, Kadison wrote, the members of FADA took up the difficult task of purifying their theater-Temple. By thus connecting FADA's restoration of the circus theater to the cleansing of the ancient Temple, Kadison framed their cleanup of the building as an act of Jewish national heroism in which the Maccabee-like actors decontaminated a sacred site destroyed by outsiders and re-sanctified it as a Jewish holy space.²²⁶

Still, as Kadison admitted to his colleagues, the circus theater was not the proper site for the opening production of a Yiddish art theater. Even before the German occupation, the circus theater had never been a respectable performance space; hindered first by its associations with

²²⁵ Alexander Azro, "Der onheyb," in *Yidisher teater in Eyrope tsvishn beyde velt milkhomes: Poyln*, Itzik Manger, Yonas Turkow, and Moyshe Perenson, eds. (New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1968), 24.

²²⁶ Kadison, "Zikhroynes," 772.

the lowbrow circus medium, and second, by the inadequacies of the building itself. In Kadison's words:

We knew all too well that a more refined sort of person would never poke his nose into the circus. The circus theater was not suitable even for melodramas and operettas. A dreadful stage and terrible acoustics. Cold and uncomfortable. The circus was particularly ill-suited to our repertoire, but, as I said, we had no choice.²²⁷

As Kadison suggested, FADA's literary repertoire and subdued realism would have been better matched with a small space with an intimate stage and good acoustics, where the actors could stand close to the audience. Instead, the circus theater was a massive space perhaps better suited to housing horses than an artistically-inclined theater company. It was difficult to hear the dialogue from almost any seat in the house, and the actors had to resort to shouting in order to be heard. The stage was literally falling apart, the lighting primitive, the dressing rooms barren, and the roof leaky when it rained or snowed. Even worse, the company did not have enough money to heat such a large space for both rehearsals and performances, and so the company rehearsed through the bitter cold of a Vilna winter without heat, their hands swelling from the frosty air as they built and painted sets late into the night.²²⁸

By the winter of 1916, occupied Vilna was a city teetering on the verge of starvation. Food was so scarce that mothers routinely abandoned their children in the streets, knowing that they would receive more food in the military-run orphanages than in their homes.²²⁹ Rampant cholera and contaminated food exacerbated the hunger problem. The extreme poverty that permeated the city's entire population was particularly noticeable among Vilna's Jews, as more

²²⁷ Kadison, "Zikhroynes," 772.

²²⁸ Ibid. "Our hands were swollen from the cold but we did not stop for anything," Kadison recalled.

²²⁹ Cohen, *Vilna*, 363-364.

than half of the Jewish population depended upon charity for their food.²³⁰ Over 2000 Vilna Jews had died in 1915, more than double the prewar number. Nearly two-thirds of them had died from starvation.²³¹ Many of Vilna's residents, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, turned to prostitution or illegal smuggling to provide for their families. It was within this context of a city utterly cowed by starvation and disease that Kadison announced FADA's opening performance.

Perhaps acknowledging the incongruity of asking starving Jews to buy theater tickets, Kadison decided to hire a publicity manager to represent FADA to the public. Mordechai Mazo was the perfect candidate for the job, as he was well liked in the Jewish community for his advocacy work to help Jews who had lost their homes or livelihoods because of the war. Mazo mounted a massive publicity campaign throughout the city, putting up posters, distributing flyers, setting up ticket discount programs, and perhaps most importantly, convincing the destitute Jews of wartime Vilna that a Yiddish art theater was no luxury, but rather, a spiritual necessity, just as Kadison had managed to convince the German commander that Vilna's Jews needed theater even more than they needed bread.²³²

Der landsman opened on February 18th, 1916 on the rotting wooden stage of the decrepit circus building. Between donations from the community and meager loans from the actors' own pockets, FADA had raised just enough money to heat the auditorium during performances. The

²³⁰ At the start of 1916, 32,000 Jews out of a total population of 60,000 relied on charity for food. Cohen, 363.

²³¹ Ibid, 369. 1088 Jews died in Vilna in 1913, while 2165 perished in 1915.

²³² On Mazo's early involvement with FADA, see Kadison, "Zikhroynes," 800-801. Mazo initially agreed to work for FADA without pay, citing his enthusiasm about the company's vision.

actors were not so lucky: there was no money left over to buy wood to heat the dressing rooms. The actors resorted to using the heat from the footlights to warm their frozen makeup.²³³

Mazo's publicity campaign had been quite effective, and opening night brought a packed house. The circus building was filled to the brim with an unusually diverse audience for a Yiddish performance. There were, in Kadison's words, "'aristocrats' who customarily frequented the Russian theaters and wrinkled their noses at Yiddish [*zhargon*], the sincere Jewish intelligentsia, the common folk [*amkho*] – craftsmen, shopkeepers, traders, laborers. And so too came many of our new rulers – German officers and soldiers."²³⁴ With the exception of the German soldiers, this was precisely the audience that Peretz had dreamed of a decade earlier. On opening night of its first production, FADA had already managed to attract the kind of diverse audience that Peretz had never been able to secure: the intelligentsia and *shund* theatergoers, the Russianists and the Yiddishists, Yiddish literature aficionados and those unacquainted with Yiddish culture, and, for reasons peculiar to Vilna's wartime situation, Jews and non-Jews.

A special commission of German military and communal leaders arrived together in uniform: the German censor, the Field Rabbi, the German Police Chief of Vilna, and the generals who commanded the city. Each official had brought his field binoculars, and Azro remarked to his colleagues that perhaps the commission had come to see "the wild animals, the *Ost Juden* [Eastern European Jews] who recently went crazy and decided to play theater in a time of hunger and war."²³⁵ The commission was accompanied by dozens of German writers and prominent members of the German press who had come to review the production. Jewish Vilna was also

²³³ Azro, "Der onheyb," 24. As Azro described the scene: "5 o'clock at night and the actors of FADA are already sitting in the cold dressing rooms of the circus. With frozen fingers they place on their faces the cold makeup colors warmed upon the electric lamps. The clock strikes eight. Our hearts leap with excitement."

²³⁴ Kadison, "Zikhroyes," 801.

²³⁵ Azro, "Der onheyb," 24.

well represented by journalists, writers, and community leaders.²³⁶ While the majority of the audience consisted of Vilna Jewry, the Germans in attendance were accorded the special privilege of front-row seating. FADA's desire to please the Germans with their first production was reflected in the program, where large German text announcing the name of the company appeared *above* the Yiddish.²³⁷ Moreover, the program opened from left to right, following the European custom, rather than right to left as was customary for Yiddish theater programs.²³⁸ There was little choice in these gestures; FADA needed German support in order to continue to operate, and the actors may have been concerned that the officers would not like their choice of subject matter. FADA's overtures towards the Germans in this first production reflect a tension that would persist throughout the company's history between the desire for their work to serve as a means of Jewish national renewal and their interest in also pleasing a non-Yiddish speaking and non-Jewish public.

Ovation after ovation followed the final curtain, to the astonishment of the actors who remained frozen in disbelief during the curtain call. The next day brought glowing reviews from the Yiddish and the German press.²³⁹ "Our Vilna amateurs have taken their test and have

²³⁶ Among the prominent Vilna Jews who attended the opening night performance were: Zalmen Reyzen, Dan Kaplanovitch, Moyshe Shalit, Dr. Tsemakh Shabad, Dr. Jacob Wygodski, Dr. A. Olshvanger, and Sh. Rozenboym.

²³⁷ The original program for *Der landsman* at the Circus Theater is preserved in the Esther Rokhl Kaminska Theatre Museum Collection (RG 8) at YIVO (Vilna Troupe Programs, Box 41, Program 175345). This program did not include the FADA logo, but all subsequent programs would feature it prominently.

²³⁸ FADA would continue to orient all of their programs from left to right during the entirety of their stay in occupied Vilna. It wasn't until the company went on tour to the Polish provinces that they began to print programs from right to left, though the convention sometimes varied from production to production.

²³⁹ Kadison describes how the company stayed up all night after the first performance, critiquing their own work and debating how they could improve. This became a Vilna Troupe tradition. These all-night debates were loud and passionate, and they occasionally caused scandals in the hotels the actors stayed in on tour, when the management would receive calls complaining about actors shouting all night. Kadison credits this tradition of self-critique sessions as a major contributor of the company's success. See Kadison, "Zikhroynes," 801.

passed,” crowed one Yiddish reviewer.²⁴⁰ The company quickly developed a following in Vilna. Initially, FADA had scheduled two matinee performances a week, but soon added performances on Saturday and Sunday nights to accommodate the growing demand. A strict repertory system with a rapidly rotating repertoire, championed by Mazo, brought spectators back for more on a regular basis. With a constant influx of new plays in rotation and a different play nearly every night, loyal fans could attend FADA performances two or three times in a single weekend and see only new material. In their first season alone, FADA presented an astonishing 28 plays, most of which were only ever performed two or three times. To keep up this pace, the company had to prepare a new play every two weeks. This meant a grueling schedule for the actors, who often rehearsed straight through the night after performances, then went to their day jobs exhausted. Their success also did not ease the company’s financial difficulties, and expenses continued to outpace income in spite of excellent ticket sales. The circus building was massive and wood was exceedingly difficult to procure during wartime, even in small quantities. Nearly all of FADA’s profits went directly to heating the space, leaving the actors to cover the costs of props, costumes, furniture, and set building out of pocket. The dressing rooms remained unheated. Heating the auditorium was non-negotiable, since the predictable availability of heat during shows was likely a major draw for impoverished Jewish spectators during a bitterly cold winter.

Throughout its first season, the company selected simple plays from well-known literary authors over material with more complex plots in order to facilitate the rapid, yet thorough, rehearsal process that their schedule demanded. A handful of Yiddish playwrights were their standbys: Sholem Asch, Dovid Pinski, Peretz Hirschbein, Mark Arnshteyn, Y.L. Peretz. When they ran out of repertoire by their favorite authors, they turned to Jacob Gordin, an older writer

²⁴⁰ Quoted in Baker, 17. This review originally appeared in *Letste naves* on February 21, 1916. The reviewer, writing under the pseudonym “Kikhot”, was probably Dan Kaplanovitch. See Baker, 17, on FADA’s earliest reviews.

despised by the company (especially Kadison) for his stiff and affected characters but still recognized by the literary establishment as a serious Yiddish playwright. Indeed, there were few options. Unlike Europe's high art theaters, FADA's artistic team suffered from an additional constraint: they were working in a language without a fully developed dramatic repertoire. While companies like the Théâtre Libre and the Freie Bühne had a rich selection of plays from which to choose their repertoire, there were very few extant Yiddish plays that met FADA's requirements of literary authorship and "serious" subject matter without necessitating complex sets or a lengthy rehearsal period. Initially, the company relied heavily on their own translations of European plays to fill the gaps. Soon, however, the dearth of repertoire became a less pressing concern. As FADA's popularity expanded, so too did the available repertoire as many of Vilna's young Yiddish writers were encouraged by the success of FADA's productions to try their hand at playwriting. Rather than preceding the development of the drama, as was the case in most European contexts, FADA's success was actually a central factor in the development of high-quality dramatic literature in Yiddish.

In addition to selecting a suitably literary, yet relatively simple, repertoire, Kadison, who directed the vast majority of FADA's early plays, also streamlined the rehearsal process by adopting a straightforward naturalist style that relied on a simplified version of the established methods of the company's Russian idols. Yet while FADA's initial style was essentially a simplified version of the naturalism common on the European stage two decades earlier, the company's naturalism still represented a significant development for the Yiddish stage. To the Yiddish critics reviewing *Der landsman*, FADA's naturalism was a major victory over the dominant anti-realistic melodramas of the *shund* stage.²⁴¹ During rehearsals, Kadison told the

²⁴¹ For example, as Kihkot wrote in his review: "It may be announced with pleasure that [FADA], instead of bringing the audience the *Khinke-pinkes*, *Song of Songs*, and other silly 'operetta art' – brings realistic dramas and

actors that their goal was to exorcise melodrama from the Yiddish theater, to “get rid of the unnatural onstage” by not “speak[ing] in a singsong manner with too much pathos.”²⁴² FADA’s naturalist style, then, was a style of opposition, constructed precisely *against* the overly expressive mode of acting associated with the *shund* theater. The Vilna Troupe would later become known for their stylistic innovations and avant-garde artistic experimentation, but FADA’s early productions did not yet demonstrate these tendencies. In Vilna, FADA was a naturalistic company whose innovations were strictly linguistic (a unified dialect, “high” language) and literary (a commitment to actor literacy, a literary repertoire, a close association with the intellectual community) rather than stylistic.

Kadison’s entreaties asking the actors to avoid pathos, superfluous gestures, and excessive face-making reflected an underlying anxiety about Jews being perceived as improperly theatrical by the outside world. Anti-Semitic rhetoric of the period frequently portrayed Jews as excessive in speech, gesture, and affect, in contrast to their more appropriate and refined Gentile neighbors. These overly performative Jews were framed as especially dangerous, since their theatrical flair could, through trickery and/or temptation, lead the righteous astray. European popular culture likewise associated Jews with melodrama. A common trope in nineteenth century European literature was the odious Jewish owner of the melodramatic theater: for example, the character of Mr. Isaacs in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), who manages the theater where Sibyl Vane acts. Dorian’s initial description of Isaacs is characteristic of how Jews-in-theater were represented in European culture during this period:

A hideous Jew, in the most amazing waistcoat I ever beheld in my life, was standing at the entrance, smoking a vile cigar. He had greasy ringlets, and an enormous diamond

comedies, presented with naturalistic tones and in a naturalistic form.” Baker, 32. On “*khinke-pinke*” as a metaphor for *shund*, see p. 41, n. 65 of this dissertation.

²⁴² Quoted in Baker, 18.

blazed in the centre of a soiled shirt. "Have a box, my Lord?" he said when he saw me, and he took off his hat with an air of gorgeous servility. There was something about him, Harry, that amused me. He was such a monster.²⁴³

Wilde's/Dorian's description of the grubby, vulgar Jewish theater manager is perfectly in line with typical nineteenth century tropes. FADA's emphasis on naturalism in its earliest productions was thus, in part, a response to precisely this sort of European anxiety about Jews as dangerously excessive performers. For the members of FADA, who sought to emulate the European art theaters, acceptance by their Gentile neighbors was a crucial element of attaining their goal. The troubling image of the excessively theatrical Jewish body could be reconfigured, in the guise of naturalism, as a Jewish body that could perform refinement and emotional restraint. Naturalism, then, served FADA's goals in two ways: first, by continuing Peretz's campaign to oppose the melodramatic *shund* theater; and second, by representing Jews to the outside world as cultured performance artists rather than performers dangerous in their physical excesses.

In the first year of FADA's existence, hundreds of reviews were published in praise of the company's productions. The non-Jewish press was just as intrigued as Yiddish journalists. For the first time in Yiddish theater history, major non-Jewish newspapers and journals began to regularly review a Yiddish theater company. Frequently, these laudatory articles were authored by famous German artists and writers, often of Jewish origin, who were passing through Vilna: the novelist Arnold Zweig, the painter Herman Struck, the journalist Hans Goslar, the poet Herbert Eulenberg. Favorable comparisons to famous European artists like Stanislavsky and Reinhardt abounded in these early reviews. The press coverage of FADA in 1916 also extended well beyond Vilna to newspapers published in Berlin, Warsaw, and beyond.

²⁴³ Oscar Wilde, *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 3rd ed. (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994), 47-48.

As local and foreign press attention mounted, the German army offered FADA the ornate Vilna Municipal Theater in November of 1916. The actors transported their sets and props from the dilapidated Circus Theater to the grandest theater building in all of Vilna. This was a major event for Vilna Jewry, marking the first time in the city's history that Jews had ever been allowed to perform on the Municipal Theater's magnificent stage. The invitation to the Municipal Theater was symbolic of the company's growing recognition among Jews and non-Jews alike. Their geographical move from the outskirts of the city to Vilna's center was likewise a powerful symbol of the company's growing import. Accordingly, the troupe added new European plays in Yiddish translation to their repertoire. The new repertoire – by Mikhail Artsybashev, Semyon Yushkevich, Arthur Schnitzler, and others – consisted primarily of naturalist dramas by German and Russian playwrights of Jewish descent. These plays were familiar to nearly everyone and attracted an even larger non-Jewish audience to FADA's productions.

Still, in spite of their achievements, the actors continued to struggle to feed themselves and their families. The economic crisis in Vilna had only worsened, and by the opening of the second season in the fall of 1916, the desperation of Vilna's Jewish community was palpable. The German army regularly requisitioned food and commodities from impoverished families to support their soldiers. Family heirlooms and religious objects, including thousands of menorahs and Sabbath candlesticks, were also confiscated by the army and smelted for cash. Colonels and Generals, short on voluntary recruits, began seizing men in the streets for forced labor and military conscription in their battalions.²⁴⁴ These seizures were disproportionately targeted at

²⁴⁴ The leaders of the Jewish community resisted these measures and tried to convince the military commanders to stop the forced conscriptions, but their efforts failed. Jacob Wygodski, who led the resistance effort, was sent to an internment camp in Germany for a year as punishment. See Cohen, 364-368.

Vilna's Jewish neighborhoods. Many of FADA's most dedicated fans spent days or weeks on end hiding in cellars and attics to avoid forced conscription. To make matters worse, with the onset of winter typhoid and dysentery epidemics broke out across the city, killing tens of thousands. Hospitals and morgues were overwhelmed by the epidemic and there were long waiting lists for ambulances, hospital beds, hearses, and coffins.²⁴⁵ Again, Vilna's Jews were particularly hard hit by these epidemics, and the death toll surged in Jewish neighborhoods. By March of 1917, the death rate of the Jewish population was 97.5 per 1000, about five times as high as the death rate before the war. Essentially, every tenth Jew in Vilna was doomed.²⁴⁶

As the situation worsened by the day, FADA continued to perform in the Municipal Theater, albeit to declining audiences.²⁴⁷ Kadison briefly considered closing the theater, but to the surprise of the actors, the Germans convinced him to keep the company running by offering additional support. Vilna's German military commanders were proud of the Jewish theater company that was attracting positive attention from politicians and artists all the way in Berlin, and they had a vested interest in supporting its growth. Throughout 1917, the Germany army provided the actors with food, shoes, and most importantly, exemptions from forced labor. The future of the theater was thus secured with a bit of bread, ill-fitting shoes, and the elusive labor exemptions that were nearly impossible to procure otherwise. They were also permitted to welcome new members into the troupe and provide them with the same exemptions. Compared

²⁴⁵ As Cohen describes the scene in 1917, "[...] there was hardly a house in Vilna which did not display a red ticket warning the public that the plague had entered there. Urgent cases usually had to wait two or three days before the ambulance could call to remove them to the isolation hospital, and in many instances it arrived too late. People had to queue up for coffins. The hearses were unable to cope with the demand, so that coffins were ranged along the pavements to await the wagons upon which they were piled. Vilna became a city of the dead, and those who still moved about felt that they were mere ghosts." Ibid., 368.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 369. The birth rate within the Jewish community likewise fell to historic lows. In 1917, only 389 babies were born to Jewish families, compared to approximately 1500 births per year before the war.

²⁴⁷ Other Jewish cultural activities continued to thrive during these years as well, in spite of the difficult wartime conditions. New Yiddish and Hebrew schools were opened, concerts were held, and the Strashun library hosted a full calendar of Yiddish literary programs.

to Vilna's Jewish community at large, the members of FADA had all of the advantages of royalty.

Still, the additional amenities provided by the army did not fully alleviate the troupe's precarious position. Actors routinely arrived at rehearsals poorly dressed and famished. As Azro recalled one 1917 rehearsal:

I remember one time, I shudder to recall it, how during a rehearsal [...] at three o'clock in the afternoon one of our most talented actresses suddenly went down like a felled tree, with a resounding slap against the hard boards of the stage and with an unspoken line still lingering on her pale lips...she lay there unmoving...three in the afternoon, and she hadn't yet had a single meal. We all stood there frozen in place....A glass of water and a baked potato [...] brought our actress back to life. A quarter hour later, she had forgotten all about it. Our whole troupe was like that then – hungry, but happy!²⁴⁸

When German officials suggested that the company leave Vilna to go on tour, the actors readily agreed. Vilna's German officers, many of whom were Jewish, envisioned a FADA tour as an antidote to the pervasive anti-Semitism that had spread throughout their army ranks during the war.²⁴⁹ The members of FADA had their own reasons for wanting to leave the city. In spite of the company's following, ticket sales had begun to decline in overcrowded Vilna as people became more wary of public gatherings during epidemics. The actors too were ready to leave their disease-ridden city for safer territory. Moreover, after nearly two years of preparing new repertoire at a breakneck pace, the actors were thrilled at the prospect of temporarily forgoing their exhausting rehearsal schedule in favor of the more relaxed pace of a tour, where they could simply present their pre-prepared repertoire. In Vilna, the troupe's repertoire had been "played out" and they struggled to find new Yiddish plays that both met their standards and would be

²⁴⁸ Azro, "Der onheyb," 4.

²⁴⁹ See Baker, 29. Anti-Semitic slanders against *Ostjuden* were particularly dominant in the German press during this period, and a strong prejudice against Eastern European Jewry had taken hold among the soldiers who were occupying large regions of Poland.

accepted by the censors.²⁵⁰ As traveling actors, they would be freed from the burden of constantly rehearsing new repertoire and could instead present only their favorite material. And so, in May of 1917, the troupe set out for nearby Kovne with a four-fold goal: to combat anti-Semitism in the Polish provinces for their German army friends, to recoup their financial losses, to escape the epidemics in Vilna, and to take a much-needed break from rehearsals while bringing their repertoire of guaranteed hits to new audiences.

PART TWO: EXODUS

When the FADA actors arrived in the Polish provinces, they found local residents waiting eagerly for their arrival. Press about the company's accomplishments in Vilna had traveled far, and Jews throughout war-torn Poland were eager to meet the band of young actors who had caused such a sensation. Never before had a Yiddish theater company received such enthusiastic reviews from Jews and non-Jews alike, and never before had a touring Yiddish troupe been welcomed with such fanfare. Crowds of admirers met the actors as they entered each town, and the leaders of local organizations competed for the honor of escorting the company to the theater. With a new audience every few weeks, FADA had the luxury of presenting only the greatest hits from its established repertoire, evenly split between Yiddish and translated European dramas. For the primarily Jewish audiences in small *shtetlekh* and villages, they performed Hirschbein's *Di puste kretshme*, Leon Kobrin's *Der dorfsyung*, and Osip Dimov's *Shma Yisroel* and *Der eybiker vanderer* – all plays with strong themes of the triumph of Jewish identity over external

²⁵⁰ Kadison, Buloff, and Genn, 9.

influences. In larger cities where audiences were more diverse, they favored European dramas by Leonid Andreyev, Mikhail Artsybashev, Ludwig Fulda, and Tolstoy.²⁵¹

On tour, FADA discovered that their work had a decided appeal beyond the hyper-literary Vilna. Just as FADA had brought together intellectuals and the masses, and Jews and non-Jews alike in its first performances, so too did its effect seem to transcend local taste. Audiences in the small towns of the Polish provinces were even more enamored with FADA than those in Vilna. Unlike a major urban center like Vilna or Warsaw, which played host to some of the best Yiddish theater companies in Eastern Europe, cities like Grodno or Kovne housed only mid-rate companies if they had any permanent Yiddish theaters at all, and spectators were often frustrated with their lack of options for quality entertainment. In a bigger city, there was always the possibility of Jews going to see Russian or Polish theater instead; in a smaller town, this was often not an option. FADA was thus particularly successful in the rural Polish provinces, where locals whole-heartedly embraced the idea of overthrowing the current offerings of the Yiddish theater in favor of a new approach. As one small-town youth described FADA's visit to his town:

It was the first great theater in my life. The first time I trembled before great, serious dramatic art. I saw them on their tour of the provinces in a small *shtetl* called Tomashov, by the river Pilitsa. We waited for them like they were Messiahs. Our hearts almost stopped twenty times from the anxiety: will they or won't they avoid our *shtetl*? Until at last they came.²⁵²

When FADA finally began to perform, the whole town "ate theater, drank theater, slept theater" for the duration of their stay; when there were not enough seats in the theater to accommodate

²⁵¹ FADA performed Andreyev's *The Days of Our Lives*, Artsybashev's *Jealousy*, Fulda's *Friends of Youth*, and Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness*. Fulda was also one of the founders of the Freie Bühne.

²⁵² Y. Honig, "Alomis un Azro (a vort tsu zeyer kumen keyn London)," printed in the program for the Vilna Troupe's 1921/22 production of *The Dybbuk* at the Kommandantenstrasse Theater in Berlin, 2. Azro and Alomis Papers (RG 729), Folder 11, YIVO.

the entire *shtetl*, spectators “stood around the stage, like in Shakespeare’s time.”²⁵³ Tomashov’s near-religious fervor for FADA was typical of the company’s experience performing in small Jewish communities.

Cities and towns across Poland invited FADA to visit them. When the company found itself unable to accept all of the invitations, locals were terribly disappointed. In Lodz, Jewish intellectuals pined for FADA for nearly a year, and the company was their primary topic of conversation. As one Lodz writer recalled: “The Jewish and German press was filled with songs of praise for them. The lucky ones who purported to have [...] seen them with their own eyes used to come and speak about them with humility. And we sat here a whole year and waited until they finally came to Lodz.”²⁵⁴

As FADA traveled, the Yiddish press continued to laud almost every production. In an unusual move, major German newspapers also covered the tour by sending out Berlin-based journalists and writers to small Polish province towns to review FADA’s performances.²⁵⁵ Yet while the press continued to compare them favorably to the famous high-art theaters of Berlin and Moscow, FADA’s first tour was not at all glamorous. The actors stayed at second-rate hotels and ate at third-rate restaurants, sleeping on the train when they could not afford accommodations. One time in Lodz, the troupe could not afford dinner until a sympathetic waiter allowed them to order gefilte fish juice without the fish at a steeply discounted rate. Bread dipped in fish juice was enough to temporarily satisfy their hunger, and the troupe continued

²⁵³ Honig, 2.

²⁵⁴ Y. Shulman, “Yidishe gezelschaft vu bistu?” in S. Gelbart, ed. *15 yor ‘Vilner Trupe’: zamlung lekoved 15 yorikn yoyvl fun der ‘Vilner Trupe,’* (Lodz, 1931), 18.

²⁵⁵ Articles praising the troupe appeared in *Vossische Zeitung*, *Deutsche Illustrierte Zeitung*, *Berliner Tageblatt* and others. The German reviewers compared FADA favorably to major European art theaters. See Jacob Waislitz, “Der gang in der velt” in Manger, Turkow, Perenson, 37.

on.²⁵⁶ The actors generally felt that the earnest excitement of the small-town audiences more than made up for the poverty of their meals and accommodations.

This first tour was the beginning of a longstanding tradition of constant travel for the FADA actors. No longer a local organization based in Vilna, the troupe began in 1917 to define itself as a touring theater company without any particular home base. The company would continue to travel constantly throughout its entire existence, rarely spending more than six months in any given locale. This was, of course, not entirely unique among European theaters and performers of the period. Max Reinhardt and Stanislavsky traveled extensively with their companies, and Sarah Bernhardt was better known for her Parisian tours abroad than her performances at home in London. But there was one key difference between the travels of FADA/the Vilna Troupe and its European counterparts: the Vilna Troupe's touring was a fundamental component of the company's artistic development. The troupe did not develop their famous theatrical style at home in Vilna, but rather in Warsaw, Bucharest, London, Vienna, Chicago, and other locales. And, perhaps most poignantly, they did not become the Vilna Troupe in Vilna, their starting point, but rather *en route* to Warsaw.

Warsaw

"As strange as it may sound, the Vilna Troupe was born in Warsaw."

– Turkow-Grudberg²⁵⁷

When FADA arrived in the fall of 1917, Warsaw was indisputably the capital city of Yiddish culture.²⁵⁸ It was a metropolis of over a million people where Jews made up more than a

²⁵⁶ On the gefilte fish incident, see Kadison, Buloff, and Genn, 26. Luba Kadison often retold this story in lectures and interviews.

²⁵⁷ Turkow-Grudberg, *Varshe dos vigele*, 18.

third of the population, constituting the largest concentration of Yiddish speakers in all of Europe.²⁵⁹ Fondly referred to as “*kleyne Pariz*” (“little Paris”) by its Jewish inhabitants, Warsaw could boast of five thriving daily Yiddish newspapers and dozens of Yiddish theaters. Not only was Warsaw the center of Yiddish activity in Europe, but the city’s influence also extended around the globe. Even the New York Yiddish writers across the Atlantic continued to look to Warsaw for approval.²⁶⁰ In the words of one literary historian, Warsaw was “the center of all of the centers of Yiddish literature.”²⁶¹ So too was it a hub for Yiddish playwrights, actors, and aspiring theater practitioners. With more Yiddish-speaking Jews than any other city, Warsaw had the largest possible audience for a hopeful Yiddish writer or theater artist, and could thus support more newspapers, publishing houses, journals and theater troupes than any other locale in Europe. It was also a city with a long history of success for talented cultural innovators migrating from other parts of the region. Like the members of the Vilna Troupe, many of Warsaw’s most prominent artists, writers, and cultural leaders were not Warsaw locals, but rather, transplants from smaller cities, towns, and villages throughout Jewish Eastern Europe.²⁶²

²⁵⁸ On Warsaw’s Yiddish culture during the interwar period, see Shmeruk, 140-155. Shmeruk argues (143) that the extraordinarily large concentration of Yiddish-speaking Jews in Warsaw enabled the city’s emergence as a major cultural center.

²⁵⁹ In 1910, Jews made up 39.2% of Warsaw’s population. The Jewish community continued to expand during the war when over 80,000 Jewish refugees migrated to Warsaw during the upheavals of 1914. On Warsaw during the First World War, see Piotr Wróbel, “The First World War – The Twilight of Jewish Warsaw” in *The Jews in Warsaw: A History*, eds. Władysław T. Bartoszewski and Antony Polonsky (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 278-290.

²⁶⁰ According to Shmeruk, even for the most prominent American Yiddish writers, New York’s Yiddish literary scene remained “no more than an admittedly very large offshoot of Eastern Europe” – and in particular, Warsaw. See Shmeruk, 151.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² As Shmeruk explains, “The colourful and many-faceted Warsaw Yiddish centre was the creation of generations of non-native writers and cultural activists.” (151). Shmeruk cites several examples of non-native expressionist Yiddish poets who rose to fame in 1920’s Warsaw, including Uri-Zvi Grinberg and Melekh Ravitsch from Galicia and Peretz Markish from the Ukraine. Among the 32 writers included in Trunk and Zeitlin’s *Antologie fun der*

Warsaw was also under German occupation during most of the First World War (1915–1918), and like their Vilna counterparts, Warsaw’s Jewish actors had tried to capitalize on the German officers’ interest in Yiddish theater, which was more intelligible to them than the Polish-language theaters that had previously dominated Warsaw. With the active encouragement of the German army, Warsaw’s five Yiddish theaters flourished during the war, attracting not only the local Jewish population but also German soldiers of all ranks.²⁶³

It was in this promising cultural sphere of German-occupied Warsaw that the members of FADA, still giddy from their success in the Polish provinces, finally developed their own unique style. It was also in Warsaw that the company first became an *international* sensation under a new name: the Vilna Troupe. Prior to its arrival in Warsaw, FADA – unprecedented as its success may have been – was still a minor regional phenomenon. It was only in Warsaw that the company began to develop its global reputation. Yet FADA’s Warsaw transformation was also an artistic metamorphosis. In Vilna, FADA had introduced several *technical* innovations that to the Yiddish stage: a unified dialect, a lengthy rehearsal period, a literary repertoire, and so on. But it was not until the actors came to Warsaw that they began to think about *stylistic* innovation as a crucial element of their artistic program.

If we were to periodize the history of the Vilna Troupe, following the lead of Yiddish theater historians of the 1920’s and 30’s, the company’s arrival in Warsaw demarcated a distinct and more mature second period in the company’s development.²⁶⁴ In contrast to FADA’s early

yidisher proze in Poyln tsvishn beyde velt-milkhomes (1914-1939) [Anthology of Yiddish Prose in Poland Between the Two World Wars], only one Warsaw native, Efraim Kaganovski, is represented. Ibid., 151-152.

²⁶³ Ida Kaminska recalled in her memoirs how the German commanders of Warsaw and Danzig frequented the Warsaw Yiddish theaters. See Ida Kaminska, *My Life, My Theater* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 27.

²⁶⁴ Among the scholars who have suggested a periodized model of the Vilna Troupe’s development are Mendl Elkin and Yitzkhok Turkow-Grudberg. See Mendl Elkin, “FADA,” *Bodn* 3.1 (Spring/Summer 1936), 116 and “Di

years when its style was but an imitation of the Moscow Art Theater (what we might call its “Vilna period”), the years between the company’s 1917 arrival in Warsaw and its production of *The Dybbuk* (the “Warsaw period”) represented a major turning point for the Vilna Troupe, in which the actors became fully-fledged creative artists in their own right. In each of these initial stages in its development, the Vilna Troupe proclaimed a single city as home base: first Vilna, with its contested twin Russo-Germanic cultural heritages; then Warsaw, with its rising Polish culture and nationalist sentiment. In Vilna, intellectuals tended to frequent the Russian theaters and worship Stanislavsky; while in Warsaw, it was the Polish-language stage that was considered the preeminent art form. When the Vilna Troupe added eight Warsaw-based members to the company, this not only extended the physical size of their troupe but also expanded the company’s theatrical models to include recent stylistic developments on the Polish stage.²⁶⁵ Moreover, in spite of its putative identification with a single city during each of these periods, the company continued to expand its tour circuit to new locales, which in turn expanded its aesthetic horizons as the actors encountered new influences and new audiences. Taken together, these developments during the Troupe’s Warsaw period – the physical expansion of the company, the adoption of Polish theatrical models, and an increase in travel – were the key factors that enabled the Vilna Troupe to gradually develop its own distinct modernist style.

FADA first arrived in Warsaw in September of 1917. On tour in the provinces, the actors had encountered the established Warsaw-based actress Esther Rokhl Kaminska traveling with her Yiddish theater company. After attending a single FADA performance, Kaminska was so

Vilner,” 18, as well as Turkow-Grudberg *Yidish teater in Poyln*, 47. Both Elkin and Turkow-Grudberg describe a “Vilna period” (1915-1917) and a “Warsaw period” (1917-1920).

²⁶⁵ These new members included director Dovid Herman, and actors Leah Naomi, Moritz Norvid, Yankev Shidlo, Yankev Gertner, Henrik Tarlo, Miriam Veyde, and Miriam Shik. This would be followed by a subsequent expansion of the company in 1920 during the production run of *The Dybbuk*, in which seven additional Warsaw-based actors joined the company: Joseph Buloff, Avrom Morevsky, Eliyahu Shteyn, Khane Broz, Yosef Kamen, and Yankev (Jacob) and Yokheved Vayslits (Waislitz). See Waislitz, “Der gang in der velt,” 40.

enamored that she convinced the actors to return with her to Warsaw.²⁶⁶ The company members agreed, in spite of their anxiety about performing in the city known for its unsparing literary critics. “We had behind us many artistic successes,” recalled Azro, “but a terror fell upon us as we neared our arrival in Warsaw. Warsaw, a city with a million Jews! [...] Warsaw, where in every Jewish corner the towering spirit of the great Peretz still loomed!”²⁶⁷ Though Peretz had died two years prior to their arrival in Warsaw, the members of FADA still felt as though they were auditioning for his posthumous approval. Perhaps the actors were also thinking of the Hirschbein Troupe debacle as they began to prepare for their first performance. Like the Hirschbein Troupe a decade earlier, FADA was a regionally successful theater company that came to Warsaw seeking approval from the writers at the forefront of modern Yiddish culture. Like Hirschbein’s company, FADA was also primarily comprised of amateurs with big ambitions. They too sought to be crowned as the representatives of Peretz’s art theater project. As FADA prepared for its first performance, Kadison and the actors likely strategized about how to avoid Hirschbein’s all-too-public flop. They chose for opening night what they hoped would be a surefire crowd-pleaser, an adaptation of Leon Kobrin’s *Yankl Boyle* staged under the new title *Der dorfsyung* [*The Village Youth*], a naturalist drama about a doomed love affair between a Jewish boy, Yankl, and a Russian girl, Natasha in a rural fishing community. The central conflict in *Dorfsyung* is the tension between Yankl’s Jewish identity and the draw of his love for beautiful Natasha, who is pregnant with his child. He wishes to marry her without converting, but her peasant father will not allow it. Ultimately, left with few options, Yankl abandons his

²⁶⁶ On Kaminska’s encounter with FADA during their first tour, see Turkow-Grudberg, *Yidish teater in Poyln*, 46.

²⁶⁷ Alexander Azro, “Dray Septembers...(Teater-zikhroynes un gedanken),” September 1944. Azro and Alomis Papers (RG 729), Box 1, Folder 5, YIVO. “Dray Septembers” is an extended version of Azro’s published essay “Der onheyb.”

heavily pregnant beloved and hangs himself out of guilt, while her father drinks himself into a stupor.

Unlike most theater companies coming to Warsaw for the first time, FADA's reputation had preceded it, spurred by the voracious interest of the Yiddish and German press. In an unprecedented move, all of the other Yiddish theaters in the city temporarily shut down their productions for FADA's opening night so that their actors could attend and learn from the visitors.

On opening night the FADA actors were petrified with fear, their fingers trembling as they applied their makeup backstage. As an audience of hundreds entered the theater and found their seats, the terrified actors peered out through a hole in the curtain ("like a cluster of flies upon a piece of sugar," recalled one actor) and counted the famous writers seated prominently in the front row: H.D. Nomberg, Hillel Zeitlin, Dovid Einhorn, Noyekh Prilutski, Yankev Dinezon, and other literary giants whose pictures they recognized from newspaper clippings.²⁶⁸ "Nomberg is in the theater, Nomberg is here!" the actors anxiously announced to each other in the dressing room. Nomberg was not only a former member of Peretz's theater circle, but he was also known as a particularly harsh critic of theater productions.²⁶⁹ The troupe's recognition of these figures speaks to the success of Kadison and Azro's push to educate the actors in Yiddish letters. All of the FADA actors were extremely well versed in Yiddish literature, and they idolized Warsaw's Yiddish literary elite. This kind of relationship between a well-read Yiddish acting company and

²⁶⁸ See Shniur, "On a nomen," 662. There is a slight discrepancy between the memoirs of Azro and Shniur about the date of Nomberg's visit. Azro recalls Nomberg being present on opening night, while Shniur contends that he came for the second Warsaw performance. Still, both actors agree that Nomberg's presence had a strong impact on the actors. "I saw in the first row a small, lean person with a thin, childlike face," described Shniur, "[...] My heart leapt at the sight."

²⁶⁹ On Nomberg's critical reputation, see Waislitz, "Der gang in der velt," 37.

the Jewish intelligentsia was unprecedented in the history of the Yiddish theater, in which actors and writers tended to feel mutual disgust for one another.

Behind the literary luminaries, the FADA members could see every Yiddish actor in Warsaw also sitting in the audience. Out of work for the evening, they had nowhere else to be. Their fans sat beside them in the gallery. With no other Yiddish show playing in the entire city, devotees of the *shund* theaters came out in droves for FADA's opening night.

As the curtain rose and the play began, the actors, intimidated by the caliber and size of their audience, were unsure what to expect. To their surprise, they were enthusiastically received by the same Warsaw critics who had famously eviscerated the work of the Hirschbein Troupe and other would-be theater reformers. As Azro described the opening night performance:

From the stage the audience hears the first notes of the famous Russian song *Vniz po matushke po volge* [*Down the Mother Volga*]. A few seconds later, and the curtain rises slowly. On the floor, in a real Russian cottage, the village fishermen weave a large net. As the curtain rises, their song grows stronger and bolder. They begin to converse while singing, and upon the threshold of the open door appears [Sonia] Alomis in the role of the Russian village girl Natasha. Her entrance brings thunderous applause. The audience is truly surprised by her *authentic Russian appearance*. Before the theater audience stands an eighteen-year-old peasant girl, a village beauty, in colorful *realistic* Russian clothes, with two long blond plaits braided through with fiery red ribbons and a samovar glistening in her tan and healthy bare arms [...]. The first burst of applause from the astonished audience took away all of our nervousness. We suddenly had courage and we performed with heightened emotion.²⁷⁰

In contrast to the hastily prepared melodramas that dominated the Warsaw Yiddish stage, the Vilna Troupe presented a meticulously prepared and carefully constructed spectator experience that foregrounded visual artistry and theatrical effect in conversation with the literary drama. The tempo was measured and purposeful, adding to the power and gravity of the dramatic text. The costumes, sets, and music were carefully selected to match the director's artistic vision. Lines were fully memorized and there was no prompter, enabling the actors to imbue their words with

²⁷⁰ Azro, "Der onheyb," 29-30. My emphasis.

layered meaning and emotion. The Vilna Troupe, as a company founded by a housepainter-turned-director with an eye for fusing narrative storytelling with visual artistry, was perfectly positioned to realize this sort of composite artistic vision.

Spectators also responded strongly to the production's naturalism. Instead of the over-the-top caricatures of the melodramatic stage, the characters of *Dorfsyung* were fully realized, three-dimensional, and believable. Contrary to what the actors had expected, it was the realistic portrayal of Gentile Natasha and her "authentic" Russian surroundings that impressed the audience most of all, rather than the portrayal of the Jewish characters. In an era when Jewishness and Russianness tended to be positioned as diametrically opposed by both parties, a Jewish actress that could convincingly portray a full-blooded Russian maiden was especially striking. The Vilna Troupe's careful attention to detail astonished Warsaw audiences with its seemingly magical ability to bridge even the sharpest cultural divides.

When the final scene of *Dorfsyung* ended, the applause lasted so long that the curtain was raised and lowered sixteen times.²⁷¹ The same prominent writers whom the actors had nervously spotted in the front row insisted on meeting with the entire company backstage after the curtain call. There, the actors learned that several highly regarded Yiddish writers had traveled from afar just to see them perform. Lazar Kahan had come from Lodz, journalist Shaul Stupnitski had journeyed from Lublin, and Zalmen Reyzen and Beynish Mikhalevitsh had traveled from Vilna to see "their" art theater take Warsaw by storm. The actors, having braced for the worst, were thrilled to receive such a warm welcome from the leaders of modern Yiddish culture.

The reviews published the next day were equally effusive in their praise. In *Haynt*, Dinezon congratulated the company: "*Mazel tov*, Jews! *Mazel tov*, we have a theater!" The Bundist journalist Mikhalevitsh, writing for *Lebns fragn*, declared that FADA's *Dorfsyung*

²⁷¹ Azro, "Dray Septembers," 3.

performance represented the beginning of a new era of Yiddish art theater that would at last fulfill Peretz's dreams. Even Nomberg, infamous for his acerbic reviews of Warsaw's Yiddish theaters, was charmed by the production. In *Moment*, he likened the performance to a moment of spiritual transformation: "I walked into the theater *a vokhediker* [an everyday man] and emerged a *yontevdiker* [festive]." ²⁷² The very act of being present on opening night was likened to a metaphysical experience, elevating everyday Jewish reality to the extraordinary sacred space of a holiday or Sabbath observance. Nomberg's effusive praise in light of his notoriously harsh criticism carried a particularly strong impact for *Moment's* large readership and spurred a massive ticket-buying rush for FADA's subsequent productions.

It was Nomberg too who crowned the company "the Vilna Troupe," a title quickly embraced by the actors themselves. For the next few years, their playbills included both names, though "*Vilner trupe*" [The Vilna Troupe] was always foregrounded in large type at the top of each program, followed by "*Fareyn idishe dramatishe artistn fun vilne*" or "*FADA*" in tiny print below it. ²⁷³ Soon, they would abandon the FADA name entirely in favor of the streamlined moniker "Vilna Troupe" that evoked both the high literary culture of their former hometown and the extent of their own success. Vilna had played host to dozens of Yiddish theater companies over the years, but it was *only* this company that people referred to as *the* Vilna Troupe, with its connotations of singularity.

Spurred by worshipful reviews by prominent intellectuals at the center of Yiddish literary culture, the newly designated Vilna Troupe quickly became a major presence in Warsaw Jewish life. *Der dorfsyung* was the company's signature piece, and played several times a week in

²⁷² Azro, "Dray Septembers," 3-4.

²⁷³ See, for example, the 1920 program for Andreyev's *Der vos krigt di petsh* [*He Who Gets Slapped*] directed by Leib Kadison in Warsaw. Esther Rokhl Kaminska Theater Museum Collection (RG 8), Vilna Troupe Programs, Box 41, Program 175199, YIVO.

rotation with old favorites like Hirschbein's *Di puste kretshme* [*The Abandoned Inn*] and Artsybashev's *Eyferzukunft* [*Jealously*], and newer additions like Hirschbein's *Tkies-kaf* [*The Handshake*] and a Yiddish translation of Gorky's *The Lower Depths*.

The histories penned by Yiddish theater critics, the memoirs of Warsaw's writers and cultural leaders, and the recollections of the members of the Vilna Troupe all present a unified narrative in which the Troupe earned only glowing reviews during their time in Warsaw. To some extent, this was true – the Vilna Troupe's reception among Warsaw's Jewish Yiddish literati was exceptionally warm. Writers and critics held banquets and galas in honor of the Vilna Troupe, treating the actors to expensive dinners and praising their work at public lectures. Many of these writers waxed poetic in their memoirs about penning laudatory reviews of the Vilna Troupe's productions for Warsaw's newspapers and journals. These texts suggest a particular relationship between the Vilna Troupe and Warsaw's cultural leaders, in which the Jewish intelligentsia unilaterally viewed the company as the sole inheritor of Peretz's Yiddish art theater mantle and thus provided the Troupe with unconditional support.

The actors, in turn, viewed their success in Warsaw as the reward for two years of struggling under difficult circumstances. "Warsaw honored us with an outstretched hand and gave the Troupe its first laurel wreath for the two years of hard labor, superhuman courage, hunger and need, that FADA experienced in Vilna," recalled one actor.²⁷⁴ With the backing of Warsaw's press and ticket sales on the rise, the members of the Vilna Troupe could suddenly afford what had once seemed inaccessible luxuries: enough food and clothing for their spouses and children, new shoes, and suitable – albeit crowded – housing.²⁷⁵ Moreover, not only did

²⁷⁴ Waislitz, "Der gang in der velt," 38.

²⁷⁵ These "luxuries," as the actors called them, were modest at best. For example, the Kadisons, a family of 5, shared a two room and one bathroom apartment with another family of three, a maid, a seamstress, and an upright piano.

Warsaw provide a steady source of income that allowed the actors to support their families for the first time but, even more significantly, their literary idols began to take a personal interest in their artistic development. The actors' memoirs are full of tales of the close relationships that formed between them Warsaw's Yiddish intelligentsia in 1917 and 1918. Yankev Dinezon, who held a special status alongside Nomberg as another former member of Peretz's theater circle of theater, grew particularly close to the actors, who nicknamed him their "*heyser khosid*" ("passionate follower"). At one point, Dinezon even tried to legally adopt an orphaned Vilna Troupe actor as his own daughter.²⁷⁶ The ties between the *Vilner* actors and their literary idols were indeed indisputably close.

However, a closer examination of the sources reveals a more complicated relationship between the Vilna Troupe and the Warsaw literary establishment. Nearly all of the memoirs and theater histories referenced above were written many years or decades after the Vilna Troupe's initial arrival in Warsaw, and they reflect the selective memory of hindsight. While many Yiddish writers and journalists did in fact voice unconditional support of the Vilna Troupe's productions, there were others who disagreed. One such journalist, writing for *Dos folk* in 1918, penned an article entitled "Good and Bad About the *Vilner*," in which he argued that the intelligentsia had poured all of their hopes into a single company while unfairly ignoring other talented Warsaw actors. Yet a laudatory tone still prevailed, and the author ultimately conceded that the Vilna Troupe had more combined talent than any other company in Yiddish theater history:

Luba Kadison recalled that with ten people in two and a half rooms, space was tight. Leib and his wife slept on a bed in the living room, the children in a room with the seamstress, the maid in the kitchen, and the other family in the second room. Luba Kadison, Int. by Louise Cleveland, Tape Recording JSCRC 236 (6), Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Harvard Judaica Division.

²⁷⁶ Shniur, "Zikhroynes," 11. Dinezon ultimately abandoned the adoption attempt at the request of the girl herself, but his effort made headlines in the press.

There is no gesture that does not have a meaning, no facial expression that does not say something, there is no tone-deaf indecipherable movement, nothing without purpose, each element coheres with the others, binds together, harmonizes, everything has a connection with everything else, traversing the frame of a certain wholeness, a certain unity.²⁷⁷

The *Vilner* could perhaps be more artistically inventive, charged Vagvild, but their merits outweighed their faults. Other critics were less enamored with the company. An anonymous journalist writing for *Arbeter tsaytung* argued that the Vilna Troupe had nothing to offer outside of their admittedly impressive production of *Dorfsyung*. They *Vilner* are a one-hit wonder, he continued, whose other productions are like “the last drops that remain on the bottom of the cup you’ve just recently drained.”²⁷⁸ Another *Dos folk* journalist, Yankev Vaserman, criticized the Troupe for not having a distinct style of their own. Instead, he accused the company of imitating a European naturalism that was not merely uninventive, but worse still, severely outdated:

The first thing that one demands from a European theater is a style, a unified and sustained tone that should encapsulate everything from beginning to end. This is how it is in every European theater that has pretensions of seriousness. But with the Vilner it does not exist [...] they lack a style. That which at first glance seems to be their artistic logic is actually *nothing more than a bad copy, and furthermore, of a theater specialty that long ago fell out of favor*. The Vilner do not belong to those that choose their direction according to their own will, no, they took their naturalism from the outside, *because it was easiest*, easy both in regards to their own preferences and in regards to its ability to elicit a strong impression from the masses. We thus ought to have no pretensions about the *Vilner*, God forbid!²⁷⁹

Vaserman concluded that the Vilna Troupe ought not to be considered a truly *revolutionary* theater (as many writers claimed) but, rather, an *evolutionary* theater – i.e. the latest attempt in a decade-long string of misguided efforts to reform the Yiddish stage beginning with Peretz and the Hirschbein Troupe, all of which failed due to a lack of stylistic and aesthetic cohesion.

²⁷⁷ M. Vagvild, “Guts un shlekhts vegn di Vilner,” *Dos folk*, Warsaw, 1918. Bella Bellarina Papers (RG 574), Box 2, Scrapbook, YIVO.

²⁷⁸ Anon., “Bay di Vilner,” *Arbeter tsaytung*, Warsaw, 1918. Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Yankev Vaserman, “Unzer teater un zayne kritiker,” *Dos folk*, Warsaw, 1918. Ibid.

Those who were more critical of the Vilna Troupe's productions tended to be minor critics writing for second-tier papers rather than the more famous and prominent literary figures. This divide between the laudatory reviews of famous critics and the more critical reviews of lesser-known journalists raises an important question: why did Warsaw's literary elite almost unanimously back the Vilna Troupe while others were far more critical? Moreover, reviews aside, what was the actual artistic value of these productions? The sources do not conclusively answer these questions, but we can hazard a few guesses. Perhaps the minor journalists were jealous of the attention being accorded to the reviews of the more famous critics, and sought to differentiate themselves by adopting a different approach. Or perhaps those without direct association with Peretz's theater circle were less personally invested in the success of the company, and thus more willing to criticize its faults.

Still, what is clear from these reviews is that a close relationship quickly developed between the members of the Vilna Troupe and Warsaw's Jewish literati in the aftermath of the *Dorfsyung* performance. Associated by the public with a certain group of influential intellectuals, the Vilna Troupe instantly became an integral part of the cultural life of Warsaw Jewry.

It is far more difficult to assess whether the productions themselves actually deserved the effusive reviews they received from prominent critics. Vaserman's accusation that the Vilna Troupe lacked an original style was not without basis. The influence of the Moscow Art Theater loomed large in the company's early productions. The fledgling Vilna Troupe imitated its principle of ensemble-based acting, its emphasis on literary analysis of dramatic text, and the naturalist acting and production style initially promoted by Stanislavsky.²⁸⁰ This naturalist style,

²⁸⁰ The Moscow Art Theater was originally founded as a naturalist theater, and in its first decade, the company was famous for its detail-oriented naturalist style: for example, adding a partial fourth wall on the front of the stage to make an interior scene more believable. By 1908, however, Stanislavsky had turned to symbolism in his production of Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird*.

as Vaserman notes, had already been out of fashion in European circles for decades by the time the Vilna Troupe began performing. Yet for Yiddish-speaking audiences in occupied Lithuania and Poland, Stanislavskian naturalism seemed cutting-edge in contrast to the overly emotive acting style common on the *shund* stage. Moreover, naturalism may have been outmoded, but it was still widely recognized as an important stage in the development of the modern European theater. For Jewish intellectuals, the Vilna Troupe's adoption of naturalism seemed to represent a significant step forward in the development of a modern Yiddish theater that was rapidly approaching the level of its European counterparts.

Still, without a style of their own, it is unlikely that the Vilna Troupe would have inspired a global Yiddish art theater movement. Early on, the Vilna Troupe was only an "art theater" in the sense that it produced Yiddish literary drama in the original style of the Moscow Art Theater, but there was not yet any distinctive Yiddish art theater *style* readily discernible in its work.

Between the company's arrival in Warsaw in 1917 and its production of *The Dybbuk* in 1920, the Vilna Troupe enacted a complete aesthetic shift, rejecting naturalism altogether in favor of a more experimental and visually-oriented modernist approach.²⁸¹ Three factors motivated this stylistic turn. First, the company incorporated new members who had trained extensively in Polish drama schools, where they had been exposed to a range of stylistic innovations and modernist staging techniques. Most of these drama students were Jewish youth who spoke Polish, not Yiddish, at home and were largely assimilated into Polish culture. Mazo, as the Vilna Troupe's manager, took on the responsibility of recruiting new members and

²⁸¹ Vilna Troupe actor Jacob Waislitz wrote of an earlier stylistic turning point around the time of the company's production of A. Vayter's *Der shtumer* in 1918. Waislitz's memoirs describe how the Vilna Troupe abandoned "classical naturalism" and embraced "idealistic realism" in this production. Waislitz, "Der gang in der velt," 39. Waislitz is alone among Vilna Troupe memoirists and theater historians in suggesting an "idealistic realism" period between the naturalist period and the expressionist period of the Vilna Troupe. Moreover, his description of this stylistic shift, which raises more questions than it answers, is not sufficiently detailed to merit inclusion in this chapter.

managed to convince several of these talented Jewish students to quit the Polish drama school, learn Yiddish, and join his company. Among these students was Miriam Orleska, who quickly mastered Yiddish with the help of Azro and, shortly thereafter, originated the role of Leah in *The Dybbuk*. Mazo also aggressively recruited other actors of diverse backgrounds. Another former Russian actor and director, Avrom Morevsky, joined the company. Other new members brought years of experience in the professional Yiddish theaters of Warsaw, including Leyzer Zhelazo, who had performed and toured extensively with Esther Rokhl Kaminska's ensemble. Another actress who joined the Vilna Troupe in Warsaw, Leah Naomi, had once been a member of the Hirschbein Troupe. Not only was Naomi a talented actress with decades of professional experience on the Yiddish stage, but her association with the Vilna Troupe also symbolized the company's inheritance of Peretz's theater campaign. Finally, Dovid Herman, Warsaw's most talented Yiddish director and a former member of Peretz's theater circle, also joined the Vilna Troupe, adding an experienced directorial voice to the company.

Next, the troupe embarked on its second tour, in which they traveled across greater distances than ever before, encountered new ideas about the theater, and expanded their artistic ambitions for the Vilna Troupe. These developments would culminate in the company's iconic production of *The Dybbuk*, which firmly established the Vilna Troupe as a modernist art theater in its own right. It was this turn away from imitating their Russian idols and towards a new ethos of Jewish modernist experimentation that ultimately inspired the emergence of a global Yiddish art theater movement.

The Second Tour

The Vilna Troupe embarked on its second official tour in March 1918, this time departing from Warsaw. The company traveled first to Lodz, then retired to the nearby small town of

Kazimierz to train the new recruits and rehearse its repertoire. Then they were off again, visiting dozens of *shtetlekh* and towns on the way to Lublin, before returning to Lodz for a second visit at the request of the city's denizens, who had become obsessed with the Troupe's every move.

On their first tour, the actors had suffered through uncomfortable travel arrangements, mediocre accommodations, and more often than not, a lack of sufficient food. This tour was different. The Vilna Troupe, renowned after its critical success in Warsaw, had become a household name. Accordingly, the actors traveled in style, renting private trains to carry the company and their sets and properties. Nahma Sandrow provides a glimpse of the actors' reception on this tour:

Townpeople and bands met them at the local stations; sometimes more than one organization turned out with a band, and the two bands – possibly one a Bundist band and one a Zionist – tried to drown out one another from opposite sides of the platform. People shoved for the honor of carrying the actors into town on their shoulders, and the actors learned to wear old trousers for the ride, since people sometimes reached up and snipped a bit off a trouser cuff, just for a souvenir.²⁸²

It was during this tour that the Vilna Troupe first became aware of its role as an emerging institution within Jewish society. This notion of the Vilna Troupe as a vital component of modern Yiddish culture was echoed by critics throughout Poland. In Lodz, a group of prominent writers and journalists published a collection of articles in honor of the Vilna Troupe's second visit, in which they heralded the actors' return to their city by detailing the company's contributions to the development of modern Yiddish culture at large:

You arrived, and with magicians' hands you made the day of your artistic festivities [*ayer kinstlerishn yontev*] a holiday for all friends [*a yontev far ale fraynt*] of Yiddish culture. You demonstrated what beautiful tones one can reap from the vibrant Yiddish language. You have shown us how to create a stage that we can all point out with pride: this is our artistic theater. With courage and hope you continue down your burgeoning path. Build the Yiddish theater, build Yiddish art, build Yiddish culture!²⁸³

²⁸² Sandrow, 216.

²⁸³ "Tsu di Vilner" in *Di vilner in Lodz: literarish zamelheft* (Lodz, 1918), 1.

In this description, the Vilna Troupe is not merely a group of performers but an instrumental organization in a larger project to elevate modern Jewish culture at large. The actors are responsible not only for the production of good Yiddish theater, but also for raising the status of Yiddish language, literature, art, and culture. This quote suggests that it is the Vilna Troupe – and not the writers reviewing them – who have offered most effective demonstration of the beauty of the Yiddish language. The influence of a Yiddish art theater, suggest the Lodz writers, is more powerful than even that of literature, and the project to build a better Yiddish theater is thus a project that furthers the aims of all who are invested in Yiddish and Yiddish culture.

On the second tour, the critic's assessments echoed the kinds of glowing approbations the company had received in Vilna and Warsaw. Local journalists praised the Vilna Troupe for its ensemble style, which made the company seem more like "a living organism" comprised of a "harmonious family of artists" than "a machine where every worker is a wheel driven along a fixed track."²⁸⁴ Others echoed the now-familiar metaphor of the Vilna Troupe as a Temple of Art in praising the company's "serious and holy relationship to the stage."

When they venture out to perform, they go to create, to poeticize, they feel as if they are *Kohens* [high priests], and they know that this holy work must not be desecrated. So they do not go onstage too early, but only after lengthy preparation, and when they do show themselves on stage, they do not see the audience at all. They do not perform for the audience, they are creating now, they are poeticizing, they are perfecting a world of poets, placing souls in dead bodies. They perform with youthful vigor, *passionately*, with reverence, never mechanically or perfunctorily, never cheerlessly or *professionally*.²⁸⁵

In the estimation of this critic, the members of the Vilna Troupe inhabited the dual role of high priests and poets. They treated their theater as sacred work, akin to the consecrated function of the *Kohanim* in preparing and maintaining the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. The *Vilner* could be

²⁸⁴ Lazar Kahan, "Der dorfsyung" in *Di Vilner in Lodz*, 5.

²⁸⁵ Zvi Cahan, "Di Vilner: eynike shtrikhn." *Di Vilner in Lodz*, 10. My emphasis.

distinguished from other actors because they never performed their duties automatically (like bored professionals) but instead approached every performance with palpable kinetic energy (like enthusiastic amateurs). As spiritually connected artists, the members of the Vilna Troupe infused new vitality into the “dead bodies” of dramatic texts, bringing them to life before the audience. In treating theater practice as a kind of transcendental activity that had the power to bring the dead to life via words, this critic suggested, the members of the Vilna Troupe exemplified the absolute highest aspirations of the literary craft.

In addition to establishing the Vilna Troupe as an integral component in the project to develop modern Jewish culture, the second tour also secured the company’s reputation as the architects of a transnational Yiddish theater. During the first tour, the members of the Vilna Troupe had still conceived of their company as belonging to a fixed physical space: first Vilna, where they initially intended to return after the first tour; then Warsaw, as they dreamed of putting down roots in the capital city of Yiddish culture. With its second tour, however, the company gained repute as a group of traveling performers that would almost certainly be coming soon to a theater near you. When critics framed the Vilna Troupe as a cultural institution with a broad impact, their reviews were meant not only for a local readership, but for a widely dispersed community of Yiddish-speaking writers and intellectuals that extended across Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and across the Atlantic.

During the Troupe’s second tour, Jewish theater aficionados speculated in the Yiddish press about where the Vilna Troupe would visit next as hundreds of towns and cities competed to woo the suddenly famous actors. Though the company had not yet traversed great distances, they were already an international sensation, inspiring reviews and editorials in the multilingual newspapers of Vilna, Warsaw, Lodz, Lublin, Berlin, Bucharest, and beyond and sparking

jealousy in communities that had not yet been visited. The Vilna Troupe had a reputation that preceded it, often years in advance, and that extended far beyond the local borders of the places it performed. When the *Vilner* arrived in Lodz in 1918, a mere two years after their first amateur performance at the rundown Circus Theater, the critics proclaimed “Finally!” as if they had been waiting for decades. As one Lodz journalist wrote for the city’s *Folksblat*:

For many years we have waited for you. [...] Jealous and pained at learning of your novel richness while becoming aware of our own poverty, our longing for you grew. [It was] a longing for *our own beauty*, for *our own art*. Not an art of imitating others, not a tired art, not the kind of art from which you take away a feeling of ineptitude like from an unsuccessful joke. [A longing for] pure, restorative art, art that is truth, harmony and beauty.²⁸⁶

While ostensibly referring to a two-year period of awaiting the Vilna Troupe’s arrival in Lodz, this article has an urgency that evokes decades of waiting for a company like the Vilna Troupe to emerge. The longing for the Vilna Troupe among Jewish communities throughout Eastern Europe, then, was not simply about wanting to see the *Vilna Troupe* perform. Rather, it was an expression of the same pining for a Yiddish art theater that had existed in Jewish intellectual circles for decades.

In the German and Polish coverage of the second tour, in contrast, reviewers did not speak of Yiddish art theater yearnings but instead expressed surprise at the very existence of an important Jewish theater at all. One German journalist who was sent to occupied Lodz was initially skeptical that it was even possible for an artistic theater to exist in a language that grated on his nerves, but emerged from his first Vilna Troupe production a converted believer. “I was thoroughly cured of my skepticism. Even the very first evening was a profound experience,” he wrote, “Here there was no trace of the swollen pathos that so often annoyed me when I sat in the theater. True art was displayed here — pure, noble art presented by people who regard their work

²⁸⁶ Fuks, *Di Vilner in lodz*, 7. My emphasis.

as a mission.” He remained bothered by the sound of the Yiddish language (“the beauty of the language escaped me”) but ultimately conceded that in spite of this single flaw, the performance still constituted great art.²⁸⁷ This narrative of a symbolic conversion from Yiddish culture skeptic to Yiddish culture believer, with the Vilna Troupe’s productions acting as the transformative hinge, became a hallmark of the company’s reviews in the non-Jewish press.

Indeed, Jewish journalists and audience members also echoed the astonishment of their Gentile counterparts that Yiddish culture could produce such a high level of theatrical artistry. In Lodz, a critic for the *Lodzer tageblatt* described his mounting disbelief while watching the Vilna Troupe’s performance of *Dorfsyung*: “It was simply unbelievable that our Yiddish theater art already contained such psychological authenticity and dramatic truth,” he marveled.²⁸⁸ Another of his Lodz colleagues reveled in the company’s negation of prevailing stereotypes about Yiddish theater. With “love and seriousness” the Vilna Troupe “has proven for the first time that the Yiddish theater is not merely a milking cow or a spice shop [i.e. the producer of a consumer good], but a cultural institution with specific aesthetic and artistic aims.”²⁸⁹ In Lublin, another Jewish reviewer admitted that he had entered the theater prepared for an unpleasant evening, as he generally had little patience with the theater in general and with Yiddish theater most of all. Instead, he was pleasantly surprised by a “Yiddish art theater” that subverted every one of his negative expectations. This was a theater “without pepper or salt, without *kupletn* [comic couplets], without dancing like Cossacks, without vehement cursing, without immature pranks.” In the place of flashy spectacle and comic antics was “pure art, where everything is present,

²⁸⁷ Adolf Kargel, “Die Wilnaer,” in *Di Vilner in Lodz*, 29.

²⁸⁸ Y. Uger, “Der ershter debyut” in *Di Vilner in Lodz*, 4. My emphasis.

²⁸⁹ Lazar Kahan, “Brukhim haboim,” in *Di Vilner in Lodz*, 3.

where everyone speaks like a person, and moves like a human being rather than a wild animal. A pure theater, beautiful, refined, tender, without pretensions, without publicity.”²⁹⁰ Of course, the Vilna Troupe did, in fact, have a rather sophisticated publicity campaign carefully orchestrated by Mordechai Mazo. What this reviewer was describing was the Vilna Troupe’s *perceived* organic quality, which gave spectators the impression that there was no artifice at all in the company’s productions and that these performances represented unadulterated artistic truth.

The Vilna Troupe’s authenticity, in turn, was directly associated with the company’s naturalist style. Just as in Warsaw, Yiddish reviewers in the Polish provinces praised the company for their ultra-realistic portrayals. “The people on the stage sit in real dwellings...with a roof above them and a carpeted floor beneath them,” glowed one Lodz critic, “And when (as in *Yankl the Blacksmith*) the iron ought to glimmer in the smithy, it glimmers, and when sparks should fly, they fly. This is the artistic seriousness with which the Vilner work.”²⁹¹ Here realism was directly correlated with artistic integrity. Another Lodz reviewer made a similar distinction between the Vilna Troupe’s naturalism and the offerings of other Yiddish companies. “This is not acting. I am fed up with ‘acting,’” he wrote of *Dorfsyung*, “Life itself, wrapped up in the heightened material of art, seemed present to me, compressed and concentrated in the eternal young sorrows of a Yankele and a Natasha.”²⁹² For this critic, the Vilna Troupe’s naturalism was the opposite of the in-your-face artifice of the *shund* stage. In the theater of the Vilna Troupe, one instead could discover “real” life, “real” characters, and “real” emotions. The Yiddish reviewers of the second tour stressed the Vilna Troupe’s commitment to naturalist acting every

²⁹⁰ Sh. Y. Stupnitski, “Di Vilner trupe.” *Lubliner togblat*, 1918. Bella Bellarina Papers (RG 574), Box 2, Scrapbook, YIVO.

²⁹¹ Heinrich Tsimerman, “Di yudisher dramatishe kunst,” in *Di Vilner in Lodz*, 8.

²⁹² Fuks, *Di Vilner in Lodz*, 7.

bit as much as they emphasized the company's innovations of ensemble, literary repertoire, unified Yiddish dialect, and lengthy rehearsal process. While the non-Jewish press continued to express surprise at encountering serious artists on the Yiddish stage at all, Jewish critics praised the Troupe for adopting a style of theater that was long out of fashion among their Gentile counterparts.

By the close of the second tour in 1918, the Vilna Troupe triumphantly returned to Warsaw full of pride. In the space of just a few short years, the company had transformed itself from a ragtag group of unknown amateurs and non-Yiddish-speaking actors into a thriving professional Yiddish theater company with a rapidly expanding reputation for thoughtful productions. Less than three years after rehearsing through a Vilna winter with no heat and with only a daily boiled potato to fill their stomachs, the actors of the Vilna Troupe found themselves courted by admirers in cities and towns across Eastern Europe, where they were treated to lavish banquets in their honor and provided with the best accommodations. By the time the Vilna Troupe returned to Warsaw, it was firmly established as a major institution at the heart of Jewish literary culture.

Even more significantly, the company had survived its first major internal crisis – though not precisely in the way that they might have hoped. Tensions had long been building between manager Mordechai Mazo and leading lady Sonia Alomis. Mazo was desperately in love with Alomis, but she did not return his affections. When Alomis married Alexander Azro, who often played opposite her as leading man, a jealous quarrel broke out that ultimately split the Vilna Troupe in two.²⁹³ Azro, Alomis, and those who sided with them left Mazo's company and

²⁹³ On the love triangle between Alomis, Azro, and Mazo, see Luba Kadison, int. by Louise Cleveland, 4. Zylbercweig's *Lexicon of the Yiddish Theater*, incorrectly identifies the company's split as having to do with a non-romantic quarrel. Zylbercweig's claim that that Azro and Alomis left Mazo's troupe because they were concerned about being permanently separated from their home in Vilna when the Russian Revolution broke out was only a

returned to Vilna, where they formed a *second* Vilna Troupe. Those who remained with Mazo carried on in Warsaw as planned. Both companies continued to use the identical Vilna Troupe logo, and for a time, staged the identical repertoire. Each branch, in turn, claimed sole authenticity as the “real” Vilna Troupe and refused to acknowledge the existence of the other. Yet rather than crippling either group, the existence of two Vilna Troupes only increased the company’s reputation. Journalists and audience members were often unaware that multiple Vilna Troupes existed, and so as press attention mounted around the world, it seemed to many as if “the Vilna Troupe” was famous everywhere. Moreover, both companies were forced to bring in new talents to make up for the departure of those who had left. Azro and Alomis enlisted skilled directors Mendl Elkin and Dovid Herman (who later switched allegiances to Mazo’s company and became famous as the director of *The Dybbuk*), while Mazo recruited the well-known Yiddish actor Avrom Morevsky in Warsaw, among others. These figures would come to have a major influence on the artistic development of both branches. Still, at the end of 1919 both of the Vilna struggled to find their unique artistic voice. Their productions were, aesthetically and stylistically, scarcely distinguishable from their earliest performances in the Vilna Circus Theater.

This would all change in 1920, when both Vilna Troupes at last found their own distinct stylistic vision: Azro and Alomis’ company with its move to Western Europe in the aftermath of the Bolshevik invasion of Vilna, and Mazo’s company with its landmark production of *The Dybbuk*. In both cases, 1920 was a turning point that signified the end of the company’s initial period of aesthetic imitation and the beginning of an era in which the Vilna Troupe (no longer the name of a single company but a global phenomenon) would become internationally renowned for its role at the forefront of modernist stylistic innovation.

partial reason.

Chapter Three: The Turn to Modernism (1920 - 1924)

It is December 1920 in Warsaw and two new Yiddish theater productions have just opened. The first is, by all accounts, an extraordinary triumph that takes the city by storm. Reviewed by every major paper in the city and beyond, it is immediately lauded as the finest production ever staged by a Jewish theater company. Polish and Jewish critics call the production “transformative,” “holy,” “spiritual,” “transcendent,” a “masterpiece” and audiences scramble for tickets that are suddenly sold out weeks in advance. The director is hailed for discovering a hidden dramatic masterpiece, and the production becomes a fixture of intellectual conversation in lecture halls and coffeehouses. Over the course of the next year, the company performs their renowned masterpiece 390 times, before a cumulative audience of nearly 200,000 theatergoers.²⁹⁴ The director and actors, lauded as artistic geniuses, will continue to perform this play to great acclaim for the next decade. They will never have a greater success; this production marks the apex of their careers.

The second production, in contrast, receives surprisingly few reviews during its first weeks in repertory, in spite of an active publicity campaign. When reviews finally begin to circulate in Warsaw’s Yiddish papers, they range from tepid approval to scathing disdain. Critics charge that the director has “corrupted” the purity of a fine literary drama with inappropriate stylistic modifications. The characters are poorly developed and the most compelling scenes seem to have been cut for no apparent reason. A single melody, familiar at first but increasingly

²⁹⁴ See Waislitz, “Der gang in der velt,” 41.

annoying as the play continues, is threaded through each act in a misguided attempt at tonal continuity. Worst of all, the reviewers contend, the director has adapted a Jewish folk classic into an ill-fitting symbolic modality modeled upon Gentile aesthetics. The production, with its symbolist and expressionist stylization, is a bastardization of Yiddish theater. Jewish critics compare it negatively to *shund* melodramas, and scold audiences for attending. Polish journalists, on the other hand, hardly review it at all.

Taken together, these seemingly opposed narratives actually describe a single production: the 1920 world premiere of *The Dybbuk* by Mazo's branch of the Vilna Troupe. On the one hand, *The Dybbuk* was a resounding success that secured the Troupe's international reputation. At the same time, however, the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* sparked a caustic debate among Jewish intellectuals about whether or not modernism belonged on the Yiddish stage. The former is the standard narrative of the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk*, as disseminated via the essays and memoirs of the *Vilner* actors; the latter a footnote almost entirely overlooked by theater historians.

Likewise, there are two competing narratives of *The Dybbuk*'s initial reception by non-Jewish critics. The few scholars who have written about the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* have tended to emphasize how Polish intellectuals embraced the production from its very first performances.²⁹⁵ Indeed virtually every article on Jewish theater between the two World Wars makes mention of the immediate extraordinary reception of the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* by Jewish and non-Jewish critics alike. But while a few Polish theater artists and critics did indeed attend, a closer examination of the sources reveals that the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* was hardly

²⁹⁵ See Sandrow, 219-220 and Steinlauf, "'Fardibekt!': An-sky's Polish Legacy" in *The Worlds of S. An-sky*, eds. Gabriella Safran and Steven J. Zipperstein (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 234-235 and 242-243. As Seth Wolitz has noted, "the performative history of *The Dybbuk* is still to be fully written. Wolitz, "Inscribing An-sky's *Dybbuk* in Russian and Jewish Letters" in *The Worlds of S. An-sky*, 168. See also Michael Steinlauf, "Między dwoma światami. Opętani tradycją" *Midrasz* 5 (1997) 27-30.

noticed by the Polish press at all – at least not until the play’s production in Polish five years later.²⁹⁶

The truth about the Vilna Troupe’s *Dybbuk* lies somewhere between these two narratives. Both are, to a certain extent, accurate. *The Dybbuk* was in fact a tremendous success, and it did introduce Jewish theater to a broader non-Jewish audience than ever before. But the initial response to the production was far more tepid than its actors cared to remember. In 1920-21, those who attended *The Dybbuk* were not at all certain that modernism was the correct approach for the high art Yiddish stage. In the aftermath of *The Dybbuk*’s success, stylized modernism became a dominant aesthetic in Yiddish theater, and the initial debates over the play’s appropriateness were quickly forgotten as “Yiddish art theater” became virtually synonymous with avant-garde theatrical experimentation. This was, of course, in line with the aesthetic development of the European art theaters that had, with few exceptions, already made this transition from naturalism to modernism over a decade earlier. The Yiddish art theater came late to the modernist table; for it was not until the Vilna Troupe’s *Dybbuk* that Yiddish actors finally embraced the new presentational styles that were sweeping Europe. But there was one major difference. In European circles, the shift from strict realism to theatrical experimentation had been largely the conscious choice of its artists. On the Yiddish stage, however, modernism was never the intent, but rather, an *accidental* discovery inspired by the unpredictable currents of Jewish life in interwar Eastern Europe.

²⁹⁶ On Mark Arnshteyn’s Polish-language production of *The Dybbuk* in Lodz and Warsaw, see Steinlauf, “Fardibekt!” 243-245. Between December 1920 and April 1921, the months during which the Vilna Troupe first presented *The Dybbuk* in Warsaw, the production received no mention at all in the following major Polish-language newspapers and journals: *Gazeta Warszawska*, *Kurjer Polski*, *Kurjer Poranny*, *Kurjer Warszawski*, *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, *Teatralny Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, and *Skamander*. Polish directors Leon Schiller and Juliusz Osterwa both wrote years later about their experience attending the Vilna Troupe’s *Dybbuk*, but in 1920-21, *The Dybbuk* had virtually no presence in the Polish press. The article database compiled by the Museum of the History of Polish Jews includes many reviews of *The Dybbuk* that appeared in interwar Polish periodicals, but none were of the Vilna Troupe production. Zosia Sochanska, email correspondence with author, December 22, 2012, January 8, 2013, and January 23, 2013.

Recently, there has been growing interest in re-examining Jewish literary modernism. Monographs by Allison Schachter, Shachar Pinsker, and Marc Caplan demonstrate an emerging consensus that Jewish modernism was a distinct aesthetic that requires a particular set of methodological approaches.²⁹⁷ While these studies go far in expanding our understanding of Jewish modernism as represented by Hebrew and Yiddish writers, the development of a parallel and similarly distinct modernist aesthetic for the Jewish stage has yet to be investigated.

Unlike in Yiddish and Hebrew literature, where there are many potential contenders for the title of “first” literary modernist, the emergence of a modernist aesthetic on the Yiddish stage can be precisely traced to one company (the Vilna Troupe) and to a single historical moment (1920–1924). These years were bookended by two of the Vilna Troupe’s most innovative, controversial, and ultimately, successful productions: *The Dybbuk* and *Der zinger fun zayn troyer* [*The Singer of His Sorrow*]. Each of these productions was a landmark in the Troupe’s development of a distinct mode of theatrical modernism; each likewise disseminated this modernist aesthetic to other theater artists, both Jewish and non-Jewish, around the world. The Vilna Troupe’s *Dybbuk* marked both the initial emergence of a modernist approach on the Yiddish stage and a broader ideological shift away from the ideal of a high-art Yiddish theater that defined itself in strictly *literary* terms and towards a *director’s* theater with an ethos of modernist experimentation. The company’s 1924 production of *Singer of His Sorrow*, in turn, was the fully-fledged culmination of the company’s modernist Jewish aesthetic, marking the beginning of a new period of formal experimentation.

²⁹⁷ Allison Schachter, *Diasporic Modernisms: Hebrew and Yiddish Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Shachar Pinsker, *Literary Passports: The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Marc Caplan, *How Strange the Change: Language, Temporality, and Narrative Form in Peripheral Modernisms* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

This chapter considers the Vilna Troupe's rejection of realism and turn to modernism during these years, which occurred almost simultaneously in both major incarnations of the Vilna Troupe – Azro and Alomis' company in Western Europe and Mazo's Vilna Troupe in the East, in spite of each company's feigned ignorance about the existence of the other branch. The Vilna Troupe's modernist embrace thus marked the emergence of a vibrant transnational "Yiddish art theater" network that superseded the interpersonal conflicts between individual members of the two Vilna Troupes.

The development of Yiddish theatrical modernism via the productions of the Vilna Troupe is a case study in historical contingency. A seemingly random confluence of historical circumstances conspired to produce a particular modernist effect on the Yiddish stage, which differed from that of its European counterparts in three key ways. First, the *Vilner* stumbled into modernism with *The Dybbuk*, and their aesthetic sensibility was thus far less self-conscious, formulaic, and artifice-driven than European theatrical modernists tended to be. Indeed, the Vilna Troupe, along with the majority of its critics, *never* employed the term "modernism" or "avant-garde" to describe its work. Instead, the *Vilner* used a variety of descriptive adjectives to differentiate their work from everything that had come before: *nay* ("new"), *andersh* ("different"), *fil-farbik* ("colorful"), *stylizirt* ("stylized"), and *teatralish* ("theatrical"), among others; while those who critiqued their aesthetic sometimes referred to it as *goyish* ("Gentile"). In retroactively applying the terminology of the European avant-garde to the work of the Vilna Troupe, I am placing Yiddish theatrical modernism in conversation with modernism as it is traditionally represented in theater history. Still, it is important to recall that the "modernism" of the Yiddish stage was also a discrete theatrical aesthetic of its own that, while related to its European counterparts, had its own distinct origin and characteristics.

Second, the members of the Vilna Troupe (with the sole exception of Dovid Herman) were *accidental* modernists. As we will see, when the company's leadership invited Herman to contribute his Hasidic expertise to the *Dybbuk* production, little did they know that their new director's *modernist* agenda would fundamentally alter the company's aesthetic. Just as the actors of the Vilna Troupe became modernists unintentionally, spectators and critics likewise felt no small measure of ambivalence about the use of modernist stylization on the Jewish stage. Wasn't modernism a Gentile sensibility, wondered the critics, and could it really co-exist with the nation-building impulses of the Yiddish stage? Could modernism ever really be Jewish? These debates, both within and outside of the Vilna Troupe, shaped the company's productions during this period. *The Dybbuk* and *Singer of His Sorrow* thus provide an important case study for understanding how Jewish theatrical modernism developed across the twentieth century.

Finally, the modernism developed by the Vilna Troupe was an aesthetic steeped in the transnational experience of its artists. The Vilna Troupe's modernism was a merging together of stylistic ideas and staging practices inspired by the various theatrical cultures that *Vilner* encountered on their travels. In the case of *The Dybbuk*, it was a combination of the Moscow Art Theater's ensemble practices with the Germany expressionism of Max Reinhardt merged with the avant-garde neo-Romanticism of the Young Poland movement in Warsaw, all blended together within a decidedly Jewish dramatic and aesthetic framework. It was this transnational stylistic approach, what we might call "fusion modernism," that gave *The Dybbuk* and all of the Vilna Troupe's subsequent productions their distinctive style.

The Vilna Troupe's turn towards modernism marked the precise moment when Yiddish theater first began to play a significant role in the modern theater at large. Beginning with *The Dybbuk*, the Vilna Troupe's modernist productions introduced theater practitioners around the

world to Jewish theater for the first time, sparking lasting collaborations between Jewish theater artists and their more mainstream colleagues. After the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk*, modernism and high-art became essentially synonymous on the Yiddish stage, enabling Yiddish theater artists to join an international conversation about the theatrical avant-garde for the first time.

PART ONE: REALISM AND THE VILNA TROUPE

In the first four years of the Vilna Troupe's existence, its members carefully selected a repertoire that reflected the company's dual aims: to bring literary texts to the Yiddish stage and to stage them as realistically as possible. This initial style, as Kadison explained, was intended as an explicit rejection of *shund* conventions:

Our goal was to create living characters upon the stage, who move and speak like living people, and most importantly – to feel and experience the roles not by staring vacantly with our eyes and throwing our hands about, but with silence, with the pauses and movements that are necessary. All of this can be summed up by a single phrase: “abolishing the fourth wall,” which meant: not making allowances for the audience, but having in mind only the part that you are playing and the other actors with whom you are performing.²⁹⁸

Like Peretz's description of his ideal art theater a few decades earlier, Kadison's memoirs describe the Vilna Troupe's style in strictly oppositional terms. The company's overarching goal, he suggests, was to negate the dominant aesthetic of the *shund* theater. Interestingly, Kadison's erroneous mention of “abolishing the fourth wall” as a principle of realism is a telling mistake: by conflating the company's early realistic approach with a key principle of the theatrical avant-garde, Kadison's memoir suggests a false stylistic continuity for the Vilna Troupe that downplays their actual aesthetic evolution.

²⁹⁸ Kadison, “Zikhroyes,” 732.

Critics also tended to emphasize realism in the Vilna Troupe's early productions. The following appraisal of *Der landsman* by a German critic is typical in its effusive praise for the company's adherence to realist principles:

This is life in its fullest and deepest sense. What those upon the stage are saying is no longer poetry, but truth. For these people are indeed living in the world into which we enter in the play, the conflicts are their own conflicts that each one of them must struggle through. Thus, the portrayal seems *as realistic as humanly possible*.²⁹⁹

In framing the Vilna Troupe's first performance as an accurate representation of real life, this critic offered the highest possible praise for an aspiring realist theater – especially one that was modeled upon the early Moscow Art Theater, which was acclaimed for its rigorous realism.

These critical appraisals of the Vilna Troupe as a realist company *par excellence* were made possible by the actors' careful choice of a repertoire that embraced literary realism and eschewed theatricality and abstract renderings. The company chose plays that were almost uniformly written by self-styled "literary" playwrights whose work conformed to a realist model. Inspired by the Socialist leanings of many of its members, the Troupe tended to favor dramas with strong naturalist themes and/or scathing critiques of bourgeois capitalist society.

The Vilna Troupe's initial repertoire was drawn equally from Yiddish and European playwrights. From the Yiddish canon, they chose Leon Kobrin's *Der dorfsyung*; Mark Arnshteyn's *Dos eybike lid* [*The Eternal Song*], a one-act drama about working class life and *Der vilner balebesl* [*The Vilna Householder*], a drama based on the life of a tormented cantor who became a success on the Warsaw Opera stage; Jacob Gordin's *Got, mentsh, un tayvl* [*God, Man, and Devil*], a tragedy about a good man's downfall, based loosely on the Faustus legend, and *Khasye di yesoyme* [*Khasye the Orphan Girl*], a social drama; Peretz Hirschbein's pastoral

²⁹⁹ My emphasis. Friedrich von Wilpert for the *Wilnaer Zeitung*, quoted in Joachim Hemmerle, "Jiddisches Theater im Spiegel Deutschsprachiger Kritik von der Jahrhundertwende bis 1928 - eine Dokumentation" in *Beter und Rebellen: aus 1000 Jahren Judentum in Polen*, ed. Michael Brock (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Koordinierungsrat der Gesellschaften für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit, 1983), 289.

dramas *A farvorfn vinkl* [*A Distant Corner*] and *Di puste kretshme* [*The Abandoned Inn*], in which the playwright dramatized family conflicts and romance among Jewish peasants living in the rural countryside; Sholem Asch's *Got fun nekome* [*God of Vengeance*], a drama about a brothel owner's misguided efforts to preserve his daughter's innocence and purity; and Dovid Pinski's *Yankl der shmid* [*Yankl the Blacksmith*], a psychological drama about a proletarian blacksmith who falls in love and tries to reform his womanizing ways.³⁰⁰ The Yiddish plays selected during the Vilna Troupe's first two years tended to feature the lives of working-class Jewish laborers; with the exception of Hirschbein's symbolist dramas, naturalism dominated the repertoire. Few comedies were included; most were wrenching tragedies that concluded with devastating consequences for their protagonists. Not all of these Yiddish plays were equally beloved by members of the Vilna Troupe; indeed, Kadison, Azro, and Mazo often complained that they were compelled to produce Jacob Gordin's dramas only because of a dearth of suitable Yiddish repertoire. Nor could the members of the Vilna Troupe agree on additional Yiddish plays that met their strict criteria for "literary" drama. European plays would have to fill in the gaps.

Though the company initially turned to European drama out of frustration with the extant Yiddish canon, the actors quickly embraced European naturalist drama as the source for a full half of their repertoire. There was also another motivation for staging European plays even more compelling than the paucity of the Yiddish dramatic repertoire. European plays offered the Vilna Troupe the ability to attract non-Jewish and non-Yiddish speaking audiences to see novel productions of their favorite plays. This motive was never explicitly acknowledged by the Vilna

³⁰⁰ The original Vilna Troupe's Yiddish repertoire also included: Jacob Gordin's *Di Shvue* [*The Oath*] and *Di kreytser sonate* [*The Kreutzer Sonata*]; Osip Dimov's *Shma Yisroel* [*Hear O Israel*]; H.D. Nomberg's *Di mishpokhe* [*The Family*]; Sholem Asch's *Mitn shtrom* [*With the Storm*] and *Yikhes* [*Pedigree*]; a dramatic adaptation of Y.L. Peretz's short story "Din-toyre mitn vint" ["A Legal Argument with the Wind"]; and Dovid Pinski's *Di gliks-fargesene* [*The Luckless*].

Troupe's leadership, but it was quite clear that the company's reputation benefitted enormously from its association with well-known European naturalist plays and playwrights. The Troupe chose Austrian playwright Arthur Schnitzler's *Anatol*, a drama about a bourgeois playboy and his many relationships; Polish naturalist Stanisław Przybyszewski's *The Golden Fleece* (loosely adapted as *The Stranger* by Yiddish playwright Jacob Gordin); Herman Sudermann's *Battle of the Butterflies*, a German comedy about a love triangle in a middle-class family; Tolstoy's tragedy of seduction and murder *The Power of Darkness*; Evgenii Chirikov's philosemitic *The Jews*, which glorifies the role of radical revolutionaries as defenders of the Jews during the pogroms; Russian naturalist Mikhail Artsybashev's *Jealousy*, a tragedy about romantic entanglements gone wrong; Semyon Yushkevitch's *Miserere*, a play which depicted the effects of extreme poverty on urban Jewish families; and Ludwig Fulda's witty comedy of errors *Young Friends*; among others. This selection of dramas and dramatists reflected the Vilna Troupe's desire to associate itself with the most prominent writers and theater practitioners of the Naturalist school. Many of these plays (including *The Power of Darkness* and *Miserere*) had been famously staged by the Moscow Art Theater a decade earlier. For other selections, it was the playwright who provided the "art theater" affiliation. Evgenii Chirikov's plays were frequently produced by the Moscow Art Theater, while Herman Sudermann's were staples of the Freie Bühne in Berlin, where Ludwig Fulda was one of the founding company members. In choosing plays associated with prominent art theater companies and naturalist playwrights, the Vilna Troupe positioned itself as a member of the international Independent Theater movement.

Even after Azro and Alomis left Mazo's company to form their own competing Vilna Troupe, the basic principles of repertoire selection stayed the same for both companies. The ideal candidates were strictly naturalist plays with tragic endings that featured oppressed working-

class characters, family conflicts, and romantic entanglements. From the Yiddish canon, both Vilna Troupes sought plays authored by respectable “literary” playwrights who had never dabbled in melodrama or *shund*; from the European canon, they sought work that would draw diverse audiences and help associate the Troupe with a cosmopolitan theater movement.

The dramatic repertoire thus remained remarkably consistent across both wings of the Vilna Troupe. In spite of each group’s insistence that their branch was the only authentic Vilna Troupe, the existence of a shared repertoire between the two companies testifies to the ongoing conversation between them and the fact that both were subject to the same cultural currents. While some actors did switch their allegiance between the two wings of the company, bringing information about the other group’s productions along with them, the shared repertoire of the two Vilna Troupes also indicates that each group closely followed the press about the other, and both often determined their seasonal repertoire by reading about the reception of the other Vilna Troupe’s recent productions. Between 1918 and 1920, both branches added dozens of new plays that were performed in rotation alongside old standbys, including, most famously, Peretz Hirschbein’s pastoral drama *Grine Felder* [*Green Fields*] and his “cellar drama” *Neveyte* [*Carcass*]. *Carcass* became an instant sensation in both companies almost simultaneously and became known as one of the Vilna Troupe’s signature plays. Indeed, the two versions of the Vilna Troupe’s *Carcass* were remarkably similar, for it was the same director – Dovid Herman – who introduced the play to both companies and directed both productions.

Carcass typifies the Vilna Troupe’s early repertoire in its gritty depiction of working-class family life, its dark subject matter, its coarse and everyday language, and its imitation of the techniques of prominent European naturalists. The play’s protagonist is Mendl Abrusch, the son of an impoverished horse trader whose career and health have been ruined by alcoholism.

Forced into poverty by his father's addiction, Mendl becomes a skinner of animal carcasses in order to support his family. Dually despised for his socially unacceptable job and his ugly appearance, he cannot lead a normal life or have a normal relationship with anyone. He seeks affection from his depressed mother and alcoholic father, but they are unable and unwilling to love him in return; likewise when Mendl declares his romantic attraction to his stepsister Reyzl, she rejects his advances, repulsed by the stench of carrion that he carries on his body. The climax of the play occurs in the final act when Mendl, desperate and on the verge of madness, strangles and kills his drunkard father.

Critics lauded both Vilna Troupes' productions of *Carcass* as a "true proletarian piece" reminiscent of Gerhart Hauptmann's *Das Friedensfest* [*The Reconciliation*] (1890), a naturalist drama of family conflict and the violent rejection of paternal authority, albeit with a happier ending; and Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths* (1901-02), which depicts the destitute urban lives of a group of lower-class social outcasts living together in a cellar lodging house and culminates in an emotionally-charged murder scene.³⁰¹ Both of these dramas were associated with founding directors and companies of the European art theater movement: *The Reconciliation* had premiered at the Freie Bühne in 1890 under the direction of Otto Brahm, while Stanislavsky's production of *The Lower Depths* at the Moscow Art Theater in 1902 had been one of the most successful plays in the company's history. By drawing an explicit connection between the Vilna Troupe's *Carcass* and these renowned naturalist productions at two of the foremost Independent Theaters in the world, critics implicitly suggested that the Vilna Troupe belonged to the European art theater scene. This public acceptance of the Vilna Troupe's "art theater" credentials pleased both branches of the Vilna Troupe, and confirmed that their repertoire selection was indeed having the desired effect upon spectators and critics.

³⁰¹ Arno Nadel, "Nuewejl," originally published in *Freiheit*, September 22, 1921. Quoted in Hemmerle, 294.

For nearly four years, the Vilna Troupe thrived by adopting a realist model and by choosing a repertoire that connected their work to European naturalism and the European art theater movement. These stylistic choices were quite successful, and both branches of the Vilna Troupe were flourishing by 1920. Yet in spite of its success, the aesthetic program of the Vilna Troupe would change suddenly and drastically in December of 1920 with *The Dybbuk*, a landmark production that would have a drastic influence on the repertoire and stylistic sensibility of the Yiddish theater at large.

PART TWO: FUSION MODERNISM

Prior to 1920, the Vilna Troupe had sought to elevate the “backwards” Yiddish stage by incorporating ideas from Russian and European companies. After *The Dybbuk*, however, the Vilna Troupe’s conception of its work shifted. No longer interested in “catching up” to external models, the *Vilner* sought instead to demonstrate that their Yiddish theater stood at the vanguard of modernist experimentation. The goal was no longer to stand on par with contemporary European theater artists, but to exceed them. We can thus read the Vilna Troupe’s *Dybbuk* as a marker of the Vilna Troupe’s entry into the modern theater at large. Or, as one member of the Vilna Troupe would recall decades later, *The Dybbuk* marked the moment when the Yiddish theater at last earned its “citizenship rights among the theaters of the world.”³⁰²

Thematically, *The Dybbuk* was an ideal vehicle for the deployment of a fusion modernist strategy. Written in 1914 by Shloyme-Zanvl Rappoport, a Russian-Jewish ethnographer better known by his pseudonym S. Ansky, *The Dybbuk*, also known by its subtitle “*Between Two Worlds*,” is a play whose central theme is the desire of its characters to build bridges across

³⁰² Waislitz, “Der gang in der velt,” 40.

seemingly insurmountable divides: wealth and poverty, tradition and modernity, choice and destiny, and ultimately, life and death.

The plot of Sh. Ansky's *Dybbuk* is well known, a testament to the global recognition of the play following the Vilna Troupe's production. Two lovers, Khonen and Leah, are betrothed by their fathers before birth. As young adults, they subconsciously fulfill their destiny by meeting and falling passionately in love. But Khonen's father is long dead and, in his absence, Leah's father breaks his vow and seeks a rich bridegroom for his daughter instead. When Khonen learns that Leah is to marry another, he turns to the forbidden mysticism of the *Kabbalah* in order to win her back, but the dark power he raises is too great for him to control and it ultimately consumes him. But the play does not end there, for the bond between these two lovers is so inextricable that Khonen is able to haunt his beloved from beyond the grave, inhabiting her body on her wedding night in the form of a Dybbuk (a dislocated soul that possesses the body of a living person).³⁰³ Khonen's challenge to paternalistic authority is seemingly thwarted when the local wonder-working Hasidic Rebbe, in a bizarre act of public theater, exorcises the Dybbuk from Leah's body against the collective will of the entwined lovers. But even exorcism cannot break the bonds of love and destiny, and the play culminates with Leah and her lover reuniting not in life but in death, transcending all of the barriers that have kept them apart.

The Dybbuk is a drama that deals in seemingly irreconcilable dialectical tensions: the living versus the dead, the rich versus the poor, the young versus the old, believers versus doubters, the rules of love and destiny versus the traditional strictures of Jewish law, the

³⁰³ On Dybbuk possession in Jewish literature and culture, see J.H. Chajes, *Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists, and Early Modern Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) and Agnieszka Legutko, "Possessed by the Other: Dybbuk Possession and Modern Jewish Identity in Twentieth-Century Jewish Literature and Beyond" (Ph.D. Diss., Columbia University, 2012).

metaphysical and the material. We might also read the play's central motif of "between two worlds" as extending, in a symbolic sense, into its production history. *The Dybbuk*'s central theme of bridging traditional divides by merging together disparate worldviews was mirrored by the Vilna Troupe's fusion modernist approach. Just as the triumph of Leah and Khonen's love in the play blurred the boundaries between opposing factions within their community, so too did the Vilna Troupe's staging put forth a thoroughly cosmopolitan vision that fused together Russian, German, Polish, and Jewish aesthetic influences into a new theatrical modality. *The Dybbuk* is a play about spiritual transcendence, but in a larger sense, the *Dybbuk* phenomenon was about the transcendent power of art – an art enacted in Yiddish – to rise above the boundaries between worlds, to reach diverse spectators from a range of backgrounds, and ultimately, to communicate that Jewish theater could be simultaneously particular and universal.

The Vilna Troupe's production of *The Dybbuk* began as a publicity stunt. Ansky had spent the last few years of his life desperately trying to get the play staged: first in its original Russian draft at the Moscow Art Theater under Stanislavsky's direction, and later, when that plan fell through, in a second Yiddish version.³⁰⁴ In public readings before Jewish intellectuals in Kiev, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Odessa, and Vilna, Ansky presented his dramatic masterpiece to appreciative audiences who, nevertheless, insisted that the play was too "literary" or "ethnographical" for the stage. When Ansky proposed a production to the prominent Yiddish actor Avrom Morevsky, he too declined to take part in the playwright's efforts, claiming that

³⁰⁴ In dozens of meetings in 1916, Stanislavsky reviewed Ansky's original Russian script for *The Dybbuk* and offered suggestions, including a request for the character of the Messenger, who was not present in the original draft. Ansky complied, and the play was accepted for production by the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theater. A director (Boris Sushkevich) was named, roles were cast (including Mikhail Chekhov in the role of Reb Azriel), and rehearsals were well underway when Stanislavsky abruptly canceled the production, citing concerns that the play was too dark for audiences after the Russian Revolution. On the proposed Russian production at the Moscow Art Theater, see Wolitz, "Inscribing An-sky's *Dybbuk* in Russian and Jewish Letters" (164-202) and Vladislav Ivanov, "An-sky, Evgeny Vakhtangov, and *The Dybbuk*" (252-265) in *The Worlds of S. An-sky*.

there were no “great roles” in the play (“God, blessed be He, in the heavens laughed without end and the angels cried,” Morevsky later recalled the encounter with no small measure of regret).³⁰⁵

Still, Ansky continued to seek backers for a production of *The Dybbuk*, writing again and again to friends in the theater world and asking for their help, to no avail. When Ansky heard about the achievements of the Vilna Troupe and its successful reception in Warsaw, he immediately contacted Kadison and suggested a meeting. The core members of the Vilna Troupe traveled to a sanitarium in Otvosk, a town just outside of Warsaw where Ansky was convalescing from an illness. Kadison and Mazo, the de facto leaders of this branch of the company, were captivated by Ansky’s reading of the play and began to prepare the script for production. A few weeks later, however, they learned that Ansky had died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 57.

At Ansky’s funeral, Mazo delivered the eulogy. Before a crowd of eighty thousand mourners, he vowed to honor Ansky’s memory by staging the world premiere of his *Dybbuk* at the end of *shloshim*, the traditional thirty day mourning period prescribed by Jewish law. The production, then, was itself intended to be a kind of ceremony: a ritual public conclusion to the period of mourning following the playwright’s death.

In keeping with the ceremonious orientation of their production, the Vilna Troupe’s *Dybbuk* sought to foreground the folkloric and supernatural elements of Ansky’s play. But the actors quickly realized that they had a significant problem: the play was heavily steeped in the specific culture of Hasidic Jewry, a branch of Jewish religious practice that emphasized strict religious observance coupled with mystical spirituality. The members of the Vilna Troupe, on

³⁰⁵ Avrom Morevsky, *Ahin un tsurik: zikhroynes un rayoynes fun a yid, an aktyor*, vol. 3 (Warsaw: Yidish Bukh, 1960), 481-486. The encounter between Morevsky and Ansky took place at a literary gathering at the Jewish Writer’s Union in Vilna. Also in attendance were Shmuel Niger and A. Vayter. Ansky, Morevsky recalled, was crushed by his colleagues’ negative response to his play, and left without saying a word.

the other hand, were secularists whose idea of holiday observance involved adding extra shows to their schedule instead of going to synagogue. Given the company's reputation for dramaturgical rigor, the actors were concerned that audiences might balk were *The Dybbuk* to be staged without the proper Hasidic context.

And so, desperate for Hasidic expertise and extremely pressed for time, the Vilna Troupe invited Dovid Herman to direct the production. Herman had once been Peretz's directorial protégé and was now an established Yiddish director who had previously directed two of the Troupe's Warsaw productions, *Carcass* and *Tkies-kaf*, both authored by Herman's close personal friend Peretz Hirschbein. Both productions had done well at the box office and with critics, though neither had been particularly different from the Troupe's previous offerings directed by Kadison. For *The Dybbuk*, however, the Vilna Troupe asked Herman to develop a distinctive production that would live up to the advance press stirred up by Mazo's eulogy.

Herman was the ideal candidate for the task: raised and educated in a traditional Hasidic household, he had the proper religious credentials; but as an avowed secularist who had rebelled and left the Hasidic fold decades earlier, he could also identify with the Vilna Troupe's repeated insistence that Yiddish theater – done right – ought to replace the outmoded synagogue as the central institution of Jewish communal life.

The Vilna Troupe may have turned to Herman for his Hasidic expertise, but Herman had other ideas. He was more interested in introducing the actors to new aesthetic ideas culled from his counters with avant-garde theater artists in Poland, Austria, and Germany. For the founding members of the Vilna Troupe, who had grown up in the heavily Russified Jewish communities of the Pale of Settlement, Russian theater was virtually synonymous with high art culture. Initially, then, the primary goal of the Vilna Troupe was to imitate the work of its Russian art theater

counterparts as precisely as possible. But Dovid Herman's approach to theater came from an entirely different context: that of Congress Poland, a region that maintained a distinct Polish cultural identity despite being under Russian rule. Herman had begun his theatrical career as one of the first Jewish students to enroll in Warsaw's prestigious Polish Dramatic School, where he trained alongside some of the most innovative avant-garde Polish directors of the period. After completing the program in 1907, Herman moved to Vienna, a major center of turn-of-the-century theatrical modernism.³⁰⁶ There he founded a German-language theater company, traveled widely across Austria and Germany, worked with famous Austrian actors like Adolph von Sonnenthal, and became a devotee of Max Reinhardt's work. Sonnenthal was so enthralled with Herman's talent that he personally invited the young director to join his company (Herman declined the request, citing his preference to return to the Yiddish stage).

In inviting Dovid Herman to work on *The Dybbuk*, the Vilna Troupe inadvertently gave the project a modernist director. Herman's outsized influence on the aesthetic of *The Dybbuk* was enabled by a feeling among the company members that his ideas carried a certain authenticity because of his Hasidic background, which none of the actors shared. As Vilna Troupe actor Joseph Buloff reflected in an interview decades later, Herman was the only one of them who fully understood Ansky's play.

[Herman] was a Hasid. Comes from that background. So his whole vision was from that angle. It's out of this world. It's a world beyond us, you see. Now, this is not a visual thing. It is *within the man, within the man*.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁶ On Vienna's role as a modernist theater center, see W.E. Yates, *Theater in Vienna: A Critical History (1776-1995)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 178-218.

³⁰⁷ My emphasis. Buloff, int. by Jack Garfein.

But during rehearsals, Herman also introduced the *Vilner* to the latest currents in German and Polish theater: on the one hand, Reinhardt's experiments with stagecraft and expressionist director; on the other, the mystical neo-Romanticism of the avant-garde Polish stage and the symbolist vision of Herman's other idol, the modernist Polish playwright and painter Stanisław Wyspiański. It was this idiosyncratic aesthetic, a fusion of Hasidic atmosphere with elements drawn from the Polish and German avant-garde, that propelled the success of the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* and enabled it to appeal to uncommonly diverse audiences around the world.

For the first time, under Herman's direction, the Troupe developed its own artistic voice. In fusing Russian-inspired theatrical ideals, Polish avant-garde stylization, and German expressionism, with Jewish mysticism and spirituality, *The Dybbuk* marked the Vilna Troupe's introduction of a discrete brand of *Jewish* theatrical modernism to the global stage.

With a strict thirty-day deadline, *Dybbuk* rehearsals were feverish and frantic. This was a mammoth project for any company to undertake in a single month, let alone a group of semi-amateur newcomers accustomed to lengthy rehearsal periods. Never before had the actors tackled such a complex script. Moreover, their new director had a reputation for being notoriously difficult to work with and for pushing actors to the limits of their endurance. Ordinarily accustomed to the minimum three-month rehearsal period that he always insisted upon, Herman's anxiety was palpable in rehearsals. Some members of the company began to privately doubt whether they would be ready in time for the scheduled opening night, but Mazo remained steadfast in his commitment to the deadline, swearing repeatedly that if they delayed the production by even a single day the others would find his dead body on top of Ansky's in the

very same spot where he had made his sacred vow.³⁰⁸ Here again, we see the parallels between the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* and the themes of the play itself: the sacredness of a promise, the power of its call for fulfillment, the lover's or artist's uncanny ability to achieve the impossible.

Opening night arrived all too soon for the anxious actors: December 9th, 1920. The audience that poured into the Elysium Theater in Warsaw that night was more diverse than any the Vilna Troupe had ever seen before. Indeed, it was more diverse than *any* audience that had ever attended a Yiddish theater production. Present among the spectators were not only the modern Jewish intellectuals who had previously comprised the Vilna Troupe's core audience, but also habitual attendees of the melodramatic *shund* theaters. Hasidic Jews in their fur hats and dark attire clamored for tickets alongside prominent Polish writers, intellectuals, actors, and politicians who did not speak a word of Yiddish. Believers and doubters, the upper class and the lower classes, Jews and non-Jews – all sat side by side to watch the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk*, equalized by the artistry they had come to witness onstage.

The *Dybbuk* was, by all accounts, an extraordinary box-office success for the Vilna Troupe. The actors played before full houses in hundreds of sold-out performances over the course of the next several months. The influx of people coming to the Elysium Theater from all parts of the city was so great that the Polish tram conductor whose route passed by the building took to calling out “Ansky” or “Dybbuk” in place of the name of the street.³⁰⁹ These terms had become household names, immediately recognizable to every tram rider in Warsaw. This anecdote suggests the extent to which *The Dybbuk* thoroughly permeated a new kind of Yiddish

³⁰⁸ Waislitz, “Der gang in der velt,” 41.

³⁰⁹ For various versions of this anecdote, see Steinlauf, “‘Fardibekt!’”, 234-235 and Sandrow, 119-220. Steinlauf lists the following corroborating sources: Zygmunt Turkow, *Di ibergerisene tkufe* (Buenos Aires, 1961), 14; Avrom Morevski, *Ahin un tsurik*, vol. 4, 109; and Marian Melman, “Teatr ȳdowski w Warszawie w latach miȳdzywojennych,” in *Warszawa II Rzeczypospolitej*, vol. 1 (Warsaw, 1968), 383.

theatergoing public that cut across ethnic and class borders, including within its reach not only an unprecedented mixed audience of Jews and Gentiles, but also the intellectual elite and the lower-classes. Even the working-class drivers of the Polish tram system were intimately acquainted with *The Dybbuk*. In the press, in the lecture halls, and in the streets, Warsaw's Jews described their city as having been "*fardibekt*" – that is to say, itself symbolically possessed by the play that had attracted so much attention.³¹⁰

Initial Reception: The Modernist Crisis

While *The Dybbuk*'s popularity with audiences was immediately clear from the play's first few weeks of sold-out performances, an examination of *The Dybbuk*'s early reception by the Yiddish press presents a more nuanced picture of the play's reception. Jewish intellectuals were slower to warm to *The Dybbuk* than the masses, and many continued to maintain their distance from *The Dybbuk* phenomenon even after the play became a global sensation. Steinlauf has chronicled Yiddish critics' opposition to the dominance of *The Dybbuk* on the Yiddish stage in the aftermath of the play's rise to fame, describing how directors and critics like Mikhl Weichert, Zygmunt Turkow, and Mendl Elkin lamented the *Dybbuk* "cult" "psychosis" and "plague" that dominated the entire Yiddish theater.³¹¹ The very dominance of this play, these figures warned, threatened to limit artistic creativity on the Yiddish stage, as actors, directors and playwrights strove to present all new work according to the style established by the Vilna Troupe.

³¹⁰ *Fardibekt* is a Yiddish neologism that emerged out of the publicity surrounding the Vilna Troupe's production. As Steinlauf writes, the word suggests being "shot through with dybbuks, dybbuks all around." Steinlauf, "'Fardibekt!'", 234.

³¹¹ Ibid., 243-248. The Hebrew version of *The Dybbuk* was also controversial. In 1926, the play was put "on trial" in Tel Aviv and accused of being outdated and of giving credence to superstition. On the 1926 controversy in Tel Aviv, see *Mishpat Ha-Dibuk: Din Ve-Kheshbon Stenografi* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Makhlakhah Le-Sifrut Yafah Ulevikoret Shebe Agudat Ha-Sofrim Vehasifrut Ha-Ivrit, 1926).

However, an equally significant debate that emerged during the first few weeks of the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* has been entirely overlooked by scholarship on the production to date. This initial controversy was centered on Herman's use of modernist techniques for the production. The debate over *The Dybbuk*'s modernist stylization reveals how Jewish intellectuals of this period perceived the Vilna Troupe's turn to theatrical modernism as an aesthetic shift with troubling implications for the relationship between the Yiddish art theater and its literary authors. Peretz and his disciples had envisioned a Yiddish art theater founded by Jewish writers and intellectuals. The ideal art theater was a company firmly steeped in Yiddish *literary* culture, in which well-read actor-intellectuals would bring the best of Yiddish literature to (hyper-realistic) life upon the stage. The Vilna Troupe had initially emulated this model, much to the delight of Yiddish writers who were thrilled by the Troupe's strict requirement that actors demonstrate a sophisticated mastery of Yiddish literary language, canon, and culture before being eligible for speaking roles. With Herman's creative departures from *The Dybbuk*'s script, however, many Jewish critics felt betrayed by the theater company they had come to think of as their own.

The Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* introduced several significant adaptations to Ansky's text: cutting dozens of lines and even entire sections; combining the third and fourth acts into a single finale; inserting an elaborate dance of death segment during the wedding scene; and adding a musical theme underlying the entire play based on the biblical Song of Songs, which heightened the erotic tension between the thwarted lovers at key moments.

Heavily stylized set and lighting designs further contribution to *The Dybbuk*'s overall modernist effect. The production began with the stage curtain opening to reveal a secondary curtain – a gigantic oversized *tallis* (Jewish prayer shawl) that framed Leib Kadison's Reinhardt-

inspired expressionist set and the entire action of the play.³¹² This framing device added a new visual layer to the spiritual and mystical tone of the play's dialogue.



*Figure 3: The Vilna Troupe's Dybbuk in Paris, 1922
Courtesy of Laurence Senelick*

The opening and closing of the *tallis* curtain at the beginning and end of each act invoked familiar ritual acts of covering oneself with a prayer shawl during individual silent prayer as well as the ceremonious opening and closing of the ark in the synagogue that reveals the Torah. The *tallis* connected the production to the same kind of mystical and ritualistic modality that Warsaw theatergoers were accustomed to seeing in a Christian context on the Polish avant-garde stage. The *tallis* curtain thus functioned as both a reminder of *The Dybbuk's* explicitly Jewish landscape *and* of its aesthetic connection to modernist Polish and German theater.

Herman also introduced an evocative prologue that used visual cues to symbolically highlight the play's major themes. As one reviewer described *The Dybbuk's* opening moments:

³¹² Later Vilna Troupe productions of *The Dybbuk* sometimes attached the *tallis* directly to the stage curtain itself.

Just as the first curtain opened, we saw before us a *tallis* curtain. The two wandering souls of Leah and Khonen, each drawn towards the other, entered accompanied by the Messenger. This immediately put us into a symbolic-mystical mood and exposed us to the proper perspective on the play. The entire first act was carried out through and through in this same tone. The singing, the conversations of the Batlonim, the mystical dance, the Messenger, all of the visual elements, the music, and the rhythm - everything was thoroughly covered with a veil of mysteriousness [...]³¹³

Though admittedly heavy-handed in its execution, this prologue echoed the mystically-infused and ritualesque production style of Juliusz Osterwa and other Polish avant-garde directors of the period.

The ceremonious atmosphere of *The Dybbuk*'s set design and staging was reinforced by the stylized vocal approach that Herman required of the actors, who adopted liturgically inflected speech patterns. A recording of Vilna Troupe actor Noah Nachbush performing one of the Messenger's monologues in *The Dybbuk* demonstrates just how musical the Vilna Troupe's production actually was.³¹⁴ Nachbush's monologue, for example, moves seamlessly between Ahavah Rabbah (the predominant Jewish liturgical mode with an augmented second) to Magein Avot (another common mode with a minor scale that occasionally shifts into major).³¹⁵ This liturgical inflection, in which the actors *sang* most of their lines, was one of the production's most noteworthy characteristics. In weaving liturgical music into the action of the play, Herman evoked the "sacred act" performance style that was common in Juliusz Osterwa's Polish

³¹³ Y. A-Ki, "Shtarker farn toyt: tsu der oyffirung fun An-skis 'Dibek', December, 1920. Esther Rokhl Kaminska Theater Museum Collection (RG 8), Folder 24, YIVO. Interestingly, this reviewer criticized the production for gradually losing sight of this mystical/symbolist tone over the course of the evening, so that by the third act, the mood had returned to a realism that suddenly seemed ill fitting in comparison with the first act.

³¹⁴ "Meshulach" tracks from *Noah Nachbush's Gems of Yiddish Poetry and Folklore*, New York, self-published LP record, undated. I am grateful to Leonard Fein and Dan Ben-Amos for providing me with digital copies of this rare recording.

³¹⁵ Judah Cohen, email to the author. December 20, 2012.

productions during this period, in which spectators were invited to bear witness to “holy rituals” – i.e. heavily ritualized performance practices embedded in modernist productions.³¹⁶

The visual and musical stylization of *The Dybbuk* reflected a major shift in the Vilna Troupe’s approach, in which the goal was no longer an accurate representation of the literary text, but rather, a theatrically evocative production that stressed emotion, physicality, and the senses over textual fidelity. The *tallis* curtain, the revised act structure, the distorted expressionist sets, the dance of death, the elaborate musical score, and the symbolic prologue were significant departures from Ansky’s drama; yet all would become characteristic elements associated with the play that were subsequently reproduced in virtually every production of *The Dybbuk* by other theater companies. *The Dybbuk*, then, marked not only the Vilna Troupe’s own transition from a literary/representational/realist model to a theatrical/presentational/modernist approach, but also a broader modernist shift in Jewish theater at large. Just as the *Vilner* had begun by imitating the Moscow Art Theater, so too would a new generation of Jewish theater artists begin their careers by imitating the Vilna Troupe’s modernist stylization in its famous production of *The Dybbuk*.

In the first few weeks of *Dybbuk* performances, critics accused Herman of betraying both the play and its dead playwright. Indeed, the anxiety that Jewish intellectuals harbored over theater that departed from its literary source text was shared by none other than Ansky himself. In the last years of his life, when Ansky began to correspond with the Vilna Troupe about a *Dybbuk* production, the author expressed serious reservations about involving a director at all.

³¹⁶ For example, Osterwa’s 1926 production of Słowacki’s *The Constant Prince* framed the entire play as a sacrificial ritual with tragic hero as a Christ-like martyr. See Kazimierz Braun, “Religious Theatre in a Totalitarian Atheistic State: The Polish Experience” in *Theatre and Holy Script*, ed. Shimon Levy (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 115-127. As Braun describes, “in the collective consciousness of the Poles a link and an analogy were forged between the Catholic Church and the Polish theatre” and Polish stage productions thus always had a “peculiar, semi-religious character.” (115)

To Avrom Morevsky, he explained that good theater required a strict hierarchical relationship between a playwright and the actors:

From my schooldays onward I have not been able to uncaringly hear and think about the direction as the decisive factor in a [theatrical] spectacle. ‘Spectacle’ always was and is for me – and will continue to be until my last breath – *playwright* and *actor*. A thousand factors can aid them and hinder them, from the painter to the heating system, from the musicians to a rainy day. But the ‘essence’ is the *player*, fertilized and guided by the *author*! So why should a third party approach the pearls of the literary work and try to alter them? Who is he? And why do we need him?³¹⁷

Morevsky was deeply affected by his mentor’s pronouncement. A few months later, when Morevsky joined the Vilna Troupe and began rehearsals for *The Dybbuk* under Herman’s direction, he fought against each departure from the script, arguing to anyone who would listen that Herman’s insertion of avant-garde aesthetics stood in conflict with the author’s original intent. “Every step, every note, every detail stood in harsh opposition to the author,” Morevsky wrote of Herman’s rehearsals. The production was ultimately a success, he conceded, but it was not Ansky’s *Dybbuk* – “Not by the most minimal measure, not for one second Ansky’s style, and not for one millimeter Ansky’s world.”³¹⁸ To Morevsky, the Vilna Troupe’s *Dybbuk* was the product of a directorial vision that subordinated the primacy of the script to its own aims.

Most of Warsaw’s Yiddish critics were initially silent about the production. Hardly any articles on *The Dybbuk* were published in the Yiddish press during its first month of performances. The flood of laudatory articles frequently invoked by actors, critics, and contemporary scholars only began to appear several weeks or months after the play’s premiere. Neither *Haynt* nor *Moment*, Warsaw’s two dominant Yiddish dailies, published a single article

³¹⁷ Ansky, quoted in Morevsky, 36.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 82-83. Morevsky’s memoirs reflect an ongoing frustration with Herman’s influence over the company. When Morevsky was recruited for the Vilna Troupe, Mazo reportedly promised him that he could be the company’s “Rabbi and leader,” an illusion to Morevsky’s role as the character Reb Azriel in *The Dybbuk*. (58) But instead of running the company, Morevsky constantly clashed with Herman, the real leader, during rehearsals.

about *The Dybbuk* for well over a week, though each paper did print a series of advertisements for the production alongside ads for concurrently-running melodramas like *Shimshon hagibur* [*Samson the Strong*] at the Apollo Theater, *Di nekome fun a gefalene* [*Revenge of the Fallen*] at the Tsentral Theater, and the similarly-themed *A dibek oder a malakh?* [*A Dybbuk or an Angel?*] at the Kino Forum Theater. Advertisements for *The Dybbuk* during these first weeks were buried in small type on the back page beneath notices for other Yiddish plays, jewelry sales, travel opportunities, and private Hebrew tutors. The discerning reader might have noticed a curious and somewhat discouraging line in the otherwise sparse text of the advertisement notifying spectators that latecomers would *not* be tolerated.³¹⁹ This sort of strict insistence on audience punctuality was anything but common among Yiddish theaters of the period. Still, outside of these brief advertisements, one could easily have been an avid reader of the Warsaw's two most prominent Yiddish dailies and encountered almost nothing about the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* for several weeks.³²⁰ In contrast, the Polish-Jewish press began reviewing *The Dybbuk* in glowing terms almost immediately after its premiere, though the mainstream Polish press ignored it.³²¹

The first *Haynt* piece about *The Dybbuk* appeared on December 17th, well over a week after the production opened. Buried on the last page, the review was remarkably critical. Ansky's play itself, wrote critic Aron Aynhorn under the pseudonym "*Eyner*" ("Someone"), is indeed a literary masterpiece, a near-perfect translation of the Jewish folk soul into dramatic form. But the

³¹⁹ "Begins exactly at 8. We ask you to be on time. Those who are late will not be let in until the *entre'acte*."

³²⁰ *Moment's* coverage of *The Dybbuk* during its first month of performances was slightly more thorough than *Haynt's*. In addition to the reviews described in this chapter, *Moment* also published a humor piece by Yiddish author Der Tunkeler, entitled "Der Dibek: a heymisher shpas" [*The Dybbuk: a down-to-earth joke*], 20 December 1920, 2, parodying the mania and extreme devotion that the play seemed to inspire among audiences. Several of Ansky's political essays were also published in *Moment* alongside advertisements for *The Dybbuk* during this month.

³²¹ The Polish-Jewish Zionist paper *Nasz Kurier*, for example, published a few glowing reviews of *The Dybbuk* in December of 1920. See Jakób Appenzlak, "Scena żydowska: Teatr trupy wileńskiej," *Nasz Kurier*, 14 December 1920 and Feliks Kuczkowski, "Dziennikarz polski o 'Dybuku'," *Nasz Kurier*, 24 December 1920.

Vilna Troupe's production has distorted Ansky's literary masterpiece. The instrument of this corruption? Stylized modernism. For, as Aynhorn told his readers, realism, and realism alone, is the *only* appropriate style for the Yiddish stage:

If one wanted to completely spare the spectator, then there is not a single moment that could not be played realistically. The director of the Vilna Troupe, however, has done exactly the opposite. Not only did they draw out the symbolic moments as much as possible, but they also *simply inserted several things that were not in the play itself*. So, for example, they inserted into the second act a "dance of death" where there is no trace of such a thing in the play. The Messenger (Mr. Nachbush) who is in Ansky's play a living person with only the smallest wink towards mysteriousness becomes on the stage a living mannequin, who goes about stretched out like a broken violin string, with empty eyes, a frightening figure. [...] But drawn towards symbolism, the director did not find it useful to sharpen at all the clearly realistic moments. In sum, what emerges is an empty contradiction between nature and stylization, which has very much ruined the wholeness of the [play's] impression.³²²

In place of Herman's stylization, Aynhorn suggested that the play ought to be staged in the mode of psychological realism, with the dybbuk as a kind of literal madness that befalls Leah (or a conscious rebellion) rather than an actual spirit who possesses her. Problematic too, Aynhorn told readers, is Herman's choice to insert new elements that "were not in the play itself." Ironically, the examples of additions that Aynhorn cited as particularly egregious later became two of the most iconic elements in future productions of *The Dybbuk*: the dance of death at the wedding and the mysteriousness of the Messenger character.

Not every Yiddish theater critic agreed with Aynhorn's analysis, and his article sparked a contentious debate in the pages of *Haynt* and its primary competitor *Der moment*. *Moment's* first *Dybbuk* review also appeared on December 17th, but critic Ber Karlinski offered an effusive paean to Ansky's "monumental play" without ever once mentioning the Vilna Troupe or the production. An analysis of the production, Karlinski promised readers, would appear the following week, thus suggesting that the Vilna Troupe's production was merely secondary to his

³²² Eyner [pseud. Aron Aynhorn], "Teatrale notitsn: tsvishn tsvey veltn." *Haynt*, 17 December 1920, 6. My emphasis.

literary analysis of the play. The following week, critic Yehezkel-Moyshe Nayman (writing under the pseudonym “A. Foygl”) published his own take on the Vilna Troupe’s *Dybbuk* in *Haynt*. Symbolism, Nayman countered, is the very soul of the play and thus ought to play a major role in any production. While the Vilna Troupe’s production was imperfect (Nayman was particularly critical of Herman’s overuse of the Song of Songs as a musical motif), it was “the best play that we have ever seen in the Yiddish theater.”³²³ Yet tellingly, Nayman never argued for Herman’s right as a director to adapt the play. Instead, he countered Aynhorn’s charge by suggesting that *Ansky himself* sanctioned each and every one of Herman’s deviations from the script: “It is a fact known to everyone that *all of the improvements that Dovid Herman added to Dybbuk were done with the permission [hekhsher] and with the involvement of the author.*”³²⁴ Herman’s adaptations, suggested Nayman, were valid only because they were perfectly in line with the author’s intent. Even those who initially advocated for Herman’s production agreed that it was the playwright, and not the director, who had artistic authority.

The debate over *The Dybbuk*’s modernism continued with Aynhorn’s reply. If *The Dybbuk* is really about the symbolic elements (such as the “lunatic Messenger” and the “bizarre” dance of dance), retorted Aynhorn, then “we ought to be permitted to say clearly and openly that *The Dybbuk* is on the same [artistic] level as Zolotorevsky’s *Yeshive bokhur* [*The Yeshiva Student*, a melodrama playing in Warsaw at the time], with the only difference being that Zolotorevsky is less pretentious.”³²⁵ In other words: if Herman’s adaptations were responsible for *The Dybbuk*’s success, the production would be merely *shund*. For Aynhorn, melodrama and

³²³ A. Foygl [pseud. Yehezkel-Moyshe Nayman], “Nokhamol vegn Anskis Dibek: a por bamerkungen tsu H. Eyner’s retsenzye.” *Haynt*, 24 December 1920, 5.

³²⁴ Ibid, 5. Original emphasis.

³²⁵ Eyner [pseud. Aron Aynhorn], “Un take nokhamol.” *Haynt*, 24 December 1920, 6.

theatrical modernism were essentially one and the same; yoked together by their disloyal appropriation of literary text for stage effect. Herman's *Dybbuk*, Aynhorn concluded, was a corruption of Ansky's masterpiece that imported ill-fitting European modernist ideas into Jewish culture: "In fundamentally Jewish plays, like *The Dybbuk*, one should not import any fundamentally non-Jewish [*goyishe*] elements, even if they come directly from Wyspiański!"³²⁶

This reluctance among *The Dybbuk*'s first Jewish critics to approve of Herman's modernist approach reflects the degree to which realism was entrenched in the very idea of a high-art Yiddish theater. Within a few weeks, however, Yiddish critics shifted their tone. As the play became increasingly recognized as an artistic and popular triumph across all levels of Warsaw society, Yiddish critics softened their critique of Herman and began to accept – and even to demand – modernist aesthetics as a viable option for the Yiddish stage.

"To Be or Not To Be For the Stage": The Modernist Embrace

While *The Dybbuk*'s initial critics in the Warsaw Yiddish press were quite ambivalent about the play's modernism, a few Yiddish reviewers, writing for minor Yiddish papers with smaller circulations, argued from the beginning that the Vilna Troupe ought to be lauded for its daring aesthetic. An effusive review of *The Dybbuk*'s opening night performance from a minor paper, preserved as a tattered clipping in the archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, is the *only* review I have been able to find from the play's premiere.³²⁷ Like other early Yiddish reviewers of *The Dybbuk*, the author began by highlighting *Ansky*'s centrality to the production's success. Unlike most early critics of *The Dybbuk*, however, he quickly turned his attention to the

³²⁶ Eyner, "Un take nokhamol," 6.

³²⁷ That I have only been able to identify a single review of the opening night performance adds to my broader claim that *The Dybbuk*'s was not instantaneously accepted among elite Jewish intellectuals and the Yiddish press.

Herman's directing, and accorded the director's modernist stylization equal credit for the production's success.

The tragedy is that Ansky wrote this play in an acutely realistic form. If the director had staged the play in *this* genre, its characters would have been far too mundane and clichéd, which would have obliterated the mystical elevations that cry out during the entire play. Mr. Dovid Herman demonstrated a tremendous artistic sensibility in staging the entire play as an enigma, casting off the burden of the superfluous realism and enlivening it here and there with a mysterious wink towards the luminous allusions.³²⁸

This understanding of the Vilna Troupe's modernist *Dybbuk* as more authentic than its outdated original would ultimately emerge as the dominant critical perspective on the production, thus drastically expanding the stylistic possibilities for aspiring high-art Yiddish theater practitioners around the world.

The Dybbuk's modernism was likewise embraced in the early reviews of the Polish-language Jewish press. Many of these critics, who were accustomed to reviewing the emerging avant-garde Polish theaters of the period, actually criticized Herman's direction for not being modernist enough. In a review published in the Zionist daily *Nasz Kurier*, Jakób Appenzlak accused the Vilna Troupe of being excessively reverent towards Ansky's flawed literary text.

Reverence flowed through the veins of this work like hot blood. As a stage manager and director, Mr. Dawid Herman should have, in my opinion, solved the dilemma of the author, the dilemma of drama and mystery. He hesitated and aimed at a compromise. There is no clear boundary between real and fantasy characters. [...] Mr. Herman tolerated realistic scenes next to those wrapped in the shroud of legend. Some episodes he simply spruced up, but on the whole the director did not demonstrate a dominant idea.³²⁹

In the Polish-language Jewish press, Herman's modernist approach was hardly controversial. Unlike most Yiddish critics, who initially accused the Vilna Troupe's production of disloyalty to Ansky's sacred original, Polish-Jewish critics like Appenzlak were inclined to charge Herman with precisely the opposite crime: *too much* reverence for the text.

³²⁸ A-Ki.

³²⁹ Appenzlak, "Scena żydowska: Teatr trupy wileńskiej." Translated by Christopher Peterson.

The major Yiddish press organs thus lagged behind both their Polish-language and smaller Yiddish-language counterparts in embracing *The Dybbuk*'s modernism and overt theatricality as a positive development for the Yiddish stage. Still, by the end of *The Dybbuk*'s first month of performances, a new consensus began to emerge. On December 24th, 1920, a full two weeks after opening night, Ber Karlinski published a lengthy article in *Moment* lauding Herman's direction. This article stood in sharp contrast to the more tepid responses published in the Yiddish press immediately after the play opened. Jews have been historically wary of theatricality, Karlinski argued, in part because of its associations with lowbrow melodrama and in part because of an overall intellectual aversion to the theater inherited from Rabbinic culture. This irrational anti-theatrical prejudice hindered the Yiddish stage and prohibited it from reaching the level of its European counterparts. According to Karlinski, *The Dybbuk*'s modernism was its greatest contribution because it put Yiddish theater into dialogue with European visionaries like Reinhardt, Craig, Meyerhold, and Stanislavsky for the first time.

Herman's direction made the play *what it is* for the first time, because the direction, in its inner character and in its essence, is the rejection of every bankrupt scenic *imitation* of life. In this sense Herman is quite possibly the true director of tomorrow. [...] The stage stands on the verge of bankruptcy, and the only way that it can provisionally keep itself alive is with that which is traced in broad outlines in the production of *Dybbuk* – the path that compels the artist to bring out of human language the maximum value of the expression together with the maximum of its visual, rhythmic, and especially, *musical* beauty; *the path of stylizing the action while simultaneously internalizing and deepening it*, of keeping the action within the framework of the picturesque, the purest beauty and the finest discretion. This is no directorial whim – this is a question of 'to be or not to be' for the [Yiddish] stage.³³⁰

For Karlinski, the modernist stylization of the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* production represented an important new direction that other Yiddish theater artists needed to embrace in order to secure their future. Herman's modernist innovations were no mere individual caprice, Karlinski concluded, but rather, a mission statement that pointed towards the Yiddish theater of tomorrow.

³³⁰ B. Karlinius, "Dos ekho: tsum 50-ter offirung fun dibek," *Der moment*, 28 January 1921, 6. My emphasis.

Other Yiddish critics soon followed suit in embracing modernist theatricality as an essential ingredient for the high-art Yiddish stage. A *Haynt* article by Ben Levi [Avrom Levinson] in mid-January turned the hierarchy initially accepted by Yiddish critics (in which Ansky's vision was more important than Herman's) on its head. Ansky's play, Ben Levi argued, is rather mediocre; the Vilna Troupe, however, managed to transform an ordinary play into a masterpiece with its modernist aesthetic:

The Dybbuk is not a great play: the dramatic content is a bit overwrought, the fable too naive, the effects too cheap, the characters too simple, and only a few good scenes, a few successful dialogues (or more accurately, monologues), a few sharply defined characters to commend the play. In general, however, it is actually not even a drama precisely, but what they call in Russia a "*bitova drama*" [domestic drama]: scenes from folk life with a naive dramatic fable and a small dose of childlike mysticism in the guise of Hasidism. If the author were not Ansky, and if the play were not being performed by the Vilna Troupe, it would certainly not have caused such a commotion in our Warsaw Jewish world. The Vilna Troupe, though, demonstrated that one could make something out of this play, something truly out of the ordinary, a masterpiece. The actors really perform it wonderfully, and the direction is splendid. You are utterly transported into the tragic, half-strangled and half-alive near-dream that is being woven upon the stage.³³¹

In contrast to earlier reviewers who sought to locate Herman's innovations within a strict literary framework that accorded authenticity to the playwright, Ben Levi countered that the Vilna Troupe's modernist staging was the highlight of the production.

This shift in the critical consensus was motivated by *The Dybbuk*'s extraordinary popular success. *Dybbuk* mania, as the press called it, was in full swing a few weeks after the opening. As audiences scrambled for sold-out tickets and the Elysium Theater added additional mid-day box office hours to accommodate the massive influx of customers, Yiddish critics started to

³³¹ Ben Levi [Avrom Levinson], "Shmuesn: Dibek, haftke, un politik-makheray," *Haynt*, 19 January 1921, 4. Ben Levi does, however, criticize Herman for an overly stylized lighting design in the second act that makes too much use of bright colors.

praise *The Dybbuk* in increasingly warm and glowing terms.³³² However, as *The Dybbuk*'s reputation continued to grow, Yiddish critics stopped commenting on the production's stylistic innovations and began to focus their attention on its remarkable reception. An article published in *Moment* on January 18th detailed the admiring reviews of *The Dybbuk* in Polish and European newspapers in disbelief as if the play's reception was itself an inexplicable act of possession: "A dybbuk, a headstrong dybbuk, has taken over the workers of the *Gazeta Warszawska*!"³³³ At times, these tales of non-Jewish spectators embracing *The Dybbuk* were partially fictionalized; in the case of *Gazeta Warszawska*, for instance, its workers may indeed have attended productions but the paper never ran a single review of the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk*.

Still, whether true or false, the press coverage of *The Dybbuk*'s extraordinary reception continued for months. Some used humor to counter the sacred atmosphere that seemed to surround every mention of the play. In March, a critic for *Moment* complained: "Warsaw has begun to take ill due to two factors: we run to see *The Dybbuk* and we gorge ourselves on chocolate."³³⁴ Another journalist imagined spotting a Dybbuk wandering the streets of Warsaw, chased by an opportunistic Herman and the Vilna Troupe actors, hoping for another lucrative business opportunity.³³⁵ Others emphasized the play's sacrosanct reception by comparing its devoted audiences to devout worshippers.³³⁶ Literary critic Nakhman Mayzel described spectators making "a true holy pilgrimage" to see *The Dybbuk* from cities and towns across

³³² By early January, the Vilna Troupe had begun selling tickets to *The Dybbuk* six hours a day, seven days a week. These additional box office hours were widely advertised in the Yiddish press.

³³³ B. Khilinitsh [pseud. Ben Zion], "Der dibek in a nayer geshtalt..." *Der moment*, 18 January 1921, 2.

³³⁴ Khad Gadyo, "Der dibek un 'fankoni,'" *Der moment*, 6 March 1921, 4.

³³⁵ M. Kipnis, "An emeser dibek... (A varshever felieton)," *Haynt*, 3 January 1921, 3.

³³⁶ On the appropriation of religious language to describe the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk*, see Steinlauf, "'Fardibekt!'" 235-236.

Europe.³³⁷ In *Ringin*, a Yiddish literary journal, Avrom Morevsky wrote of the throngs of “kosher, god-fearing, sincere believers” who became deeply attached to *The Dybbuk*.³³⁸ Others described the *Dybbuk* mania that had taken over Warsaw: how the play was the primary topic of conversation for months on end in cafes and literary salons; how the Vilna Troupe actors had suddenly become international celebrities; how the streets of the city were filled with Jews and non-Jews alike singing Hasidic *nigunim* [wordless melodies] learned from *The Dybbuk*.³³⁹ By the winter of 1921, the focus of *The Dybbuk*’s Yiddish critics was now squarely centered on responses to the production. Herman’s modernist techniques, first derided then accepted, were no longer a matter of debate or even comment.

***The Dybbuk* as Manifesto**

How did the members of the Vilna Troupe envision their use of modernist techniques at the time of *The Dybbuk*’s premiere? Moreover, how did they represent these choices to their spectators? The program booklet for *The Dybbuk* offers insight into how the Vilna Troupe, inspired by Herman, redefined their company as a modernist enterprise.³⁴⁰ The booklet, which features a drawing (likely by Kadison) of Leah embracing Khonen’s ghostly spirit, contains several essays in addition to the cast list, playwright biography, and list of acts and scenes customary in Yiddish theater programs of the period. For the Vilna Troupe, whose early programs tended to be single-sheet documents that often included little more than the names of

³³⁷ Nakhman Mayzel, *Geven a mol a lebn: dos yidishe kultur-lebn in Poyln tsvishn beyde velt milkhomes* (Buenos Aires, 1951), 122.

³³⁸ Avrom Morevsky, “Tsvishn tsvey dibukim,” *Ringin* 3-4 (1921), 165.

³³⁹ Mayzel, 118-119.

³⁴⁰ The program for *The Dybbuk* is undated. Given its contents, which include a theater review first printed on December 24, 1920, it is clear that the booklet was produced after the Vilna Troupe’s first few weeks of performances. There may have been an earlier version of this program, but no such document was preserved in any of the actors’ archives.

the cast and crew, the preparation of a booklet-length program was a major departure from its previous productions. Within the context of Vilna Troupe's ordinarily simple programs, the high production value of the *Dybbuk* program and the declamatory tone of the essays contained within it suggests that this document ought to be read as the Vilna Troupe's "missing" manifesto.

The Dybbuk program may not have been officially labeled as a manifesto, but it served the same function: articulating an artistic program, albeit in a less confrontational manner than the manners of the Vilna Troupe's European avant-garde peers. Eugene Ionesco famously defined the avant-garde artist as someone who is perpetually engaged in opposition and rupture: "An avant-garde man is like an enemy inside a city which he is bent on destroying, against which he rebels; for like any system of government, an established form of expression is also a form of oppression. The avant-garde man is the opponent of an existing system."³⁴¹ That is to say, avant-garde theater in Europe meant rebelling against an oppressively dominant means of artistic expression. In contrast, the Vilna Troupe positioned their work as a study in contrasts caught in the balance between two equally important worldviews. In the most clearly manifesto-like piece in the program, Vilna Troupe actor Avrom Morevsky's "*Spektakl tsu shloshim*" ["Spectacle in Honor of the Thirty Day Anniversary" (of Ansky's Death)], he describes *The Dybbuk* as a piece whose power lies in its ability to bring together seemingly opposed ideas.³⁴²

Two worlds, two worlds –
Heaven and hell,
Body and soul,
Truth and illusion,
Content and form –
The contradictions grapple with each other, and this shapes the powerful process that we
call "life."

³⁴¹ Eugene Ionesco, "The Avant-Garde Theatre," *Tulane Drama Review* 5.2 (December 1960), 45.

³⁴² While Morevsky initially opposed Herman's stylistic choices during the rehearsal process for *The Dybbuk*, this document attests to his subsequent embrace of the production's style a few weeks after the opening, thus following the pattern of the Yiddish theater critics.

And when the quarrel ends, when one world has annihilated the other and rules in eternal
victory over the contradiction – then there is eternal peace, but no life...
Life is the threshold between two worlds
Life is the fusion of both contradictions
Life is the point where both worlds have intersected one another and each will not yield
even one sliver of its own existence to the other...
Theater is life...
Life through and through,
Only life!³⁴³

Old and new, truth and illusion, form and content, body and soul, tradition and modernity – all coexist peacefully in *The Dybbuk*. The Vilna Troupe's claim to artistic truth, then, comes not from its declaration of a new oppositional mode of expression, but rather, from its embrace of contradictory principles and ideas. In line with the tradition of Talmudic argumentation, artistic truth exists in the well-made argument, not in its resolution. As a manifesto for a theatrical avant-garde, the essay is decidedly Jewish in its alignment with the principles of traditional Jewish exegesis.

The Dybbuk was the perfect vehicle for the articulation of an artistic program that sought to fuse Jewish and European theatrical ideas, and its theme of opposing worlds in collision resonated strongly with Jewish audiences at this precise historical moment. Decades of upheavals – years of repeated pogroms, rapid urbanization, forced migrations during the First World War, and the emergence of a thriving secular Jewish culture – had wrought enormous and rapid change upon Eastern European Jewish life, and Jews struggled to adapt to their sudden entry into modernity. At the same time, they were drawn towards the promise of what a modern urban life could offer them in the newly reconstituted Polish Republic, which promised Jews equal civil and cultural rights, though it did not always deliver on these assurances. *The Dybbuk's* theme of being pulled between two equally attractive and opposing worlds captivated

³⁴³ *The Dybbuk* program, Alef section. Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Programs Collection 1, Europe Programs folder. Harvard Judaica Division.

Warsaw's Jewish audiences, many of whom identified with the metaphysical predicament of the tormented lovers.³⁴⁴

The Vilna Troupe's production further emphasized this theme of "between two worlds" in the play's final scene. Where Ansky's play ends with the reunion of Leah and Khonen in the spiritual realm and the Rebbe's distress upon discovering Leah's dead body, Herman followed the closing of the final (*tallis*) curtain with an additional epilogue in which all of the actors, representing characters both alive and dead, appeared together on stage chanting the Biblical *Song of Songs*, the production's primary musical motif. By thus adding a new finale in which living and dead characters join hands and sing in chorus, the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* dangled the possibility of an ultimate reconciliation between the binary divides that are the source of the play's major conflicts – an attractive suggestion for Yiddish-speaking spectators torn between their loyalty to traditional Jewish culture and the draw of full integration into modern society.

Morevsky's essay reveals how the Vilna Troupe positioned its modernist approach as something that was distinct from the dominant avant-gardes of its neighbors. Some of the classic themes of the modernist manifesto are present in addition to the "between two worlds" motif, though they are differently expressed. There is indeed a preoccupation with developing new forms, but unlike his European avant-garde brethren, Morevsky concludes that traditional content is always superior to ephemeral form ("Forms change, moldy and ruined they decline....Content remains").³⁴⁵ While breakage with the past tended to be cast in a positive light

³⁴⁴ Gabriella Safran and David Roskies have elsewhere described how Ansky himself was an arbiter between worlds. See Safran, *Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk's Creator S. An-sky* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) and Roskies, "Introduction" to S. Ansky, *The Dybbuk and Other Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), xi-xxxvi. "Having lived most of his life 'on the border between two worlds,'" writes Roskies, "he made the subject of competing loyalties into the substance of his fiction, drama, essays, and memoirs (xi).

³⁴⁵ *The Dybbuk* program, Beys section.

by European modernists, Morevsky instead describes longing for ancient tradition even at the dawn of a new artistic era.

We stand upon the threshold between two worlds, as the falling columns rumble and crack.
As our bodies grow weary and our souls tremble with deep longing for that which is disappearing while pining for that which is yet to come –
We are a generation split in two, a tormented generation, a bewildered generation. And upon our lips blessings mingle together with curses.
Lamentations are bundled together in our hearts with shouts of cheering greeting.
We wander and we never find where the beginning is, or the end.³⁴⁶

Morevsky depicts his generation as caught between its twin allegiances to the disappearing old world and the new one that is emerging to replace it. The implication? *The Dybbuk*, which depicts a world in which traditional Jewish life and modernity co-exist and in which love is ultimately able to transcend the boundaries between them, perfectly captures the challenges of living in this particular historical moment and offers a compelling solution. It is only in the transcendent fusion of new *and* ancient, living *and* dead, young *and* old that a viable future is possible. As a modernist vision, this emphasis on the retention of traditional models alongside newer ones is starkly distinct from most other European modernisms.

The Vilna Troupe’s “fusion modernism” could thus also be called an “inclusive modernism” – that is to say, it is a modernism without a clear opponent or antagonist. Tradition is simultaneously rejected *and* embraced, and there is a tremendous amount of ambivalence in depictions of both the old and the new. The Miropoler Rebbe, the dominant representative of traditional Jewish culture, is both problematic *and* sympathetic, as are the parents, the lovers’ friends, and even Khonen, with his terrifying descent into the dark side of Jewish mysticism. It is only the lovers’ relationship – and their refusal to remain apart – that is represented in unequivocally positive terms. By adding a final scene in which all of the characters join Khonen

³⁴⁶ *The Dybbuk* program, Gimel section.

and Leah in transcending the binaries between worlds, Herman's direction emphasized the contrast between the complex and bifurcated portrayal of all of the other characters in the play and the supreme clarity of the young lovers' position.³⁴⁷

The essay also provides us with another clue about the aesthetic that the Vilna Troupe developed for *The Dybbuk*. In addition to its emphasis on merging old and new rather than destroying traditional artistic modes, theirs was also a modernism that drew emphatically upon religious and proto-national contexts. As much as Morevsky's essay strikes the tone of a modernist manifesto, it also positions the Vilna Troupe's work as having a particular spiritual resonance for the Jewish people. *The Dybbuk*, Morevsky writes, represents not only "a turning point in the history of the new Yiddish culture," but also a return to the theater's ancient association with religious life:³⁴⁸

Theater was once a place of prayer and ecstasy, of tremendous exaltation, of spirituality. The elders used to go to the theater in order to praise God - during the holiest days of the year...

Theater became a place of vulgar recreation, of overindulgent physicality, of spiritually bereft amusement that played upon lowly desires -

This is what has become of the theater under its current sovereigns - the gluttons, the exploiters [...]

And their world is disintegrating!

A new world is on the way, it is coming, it is almost here -

A world of builders and creators

A world where entertainment is a form of spiritual service to the divine [*avoyde*].³⁴⁹

Morevsky incorporates religiously inflected language throughout the essay. He calls upon his readers to "piously remember [*frum mazker zayn*] the holy spirit of Shloyme Zalmen son of

³⁴⁷ Herman's direction in this final scene explicitly positioned Leah and Khonen's reunion as a "happy ending," but in Ansky's *play* the reader is left uncertain as to how to respond to their death/reconciliation. Having defied all of the authorities, have Leah and Khonen at last achieved peace or are their souls doomed to eternal suffering? Ansky is anything but clear on this point, and the tone of his ending is left largely open to the reader's interpretation. I am grateful to Joel Berkowitz for this insight.

³⁴⁸ *The Dybbuk* program, Hey section.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., Daled section.

Aharon the Cohen Ansky” and concludes by invoking the opening lines of the Mourner’s Kaddish, the traditional Jewish prayer for the dead, thus suggesting that the entire *Dybbuk* production was a kind of memorial prayer in Ansky’s honor.³⁵⁰ The essay concludes with a plea for readers to join the Vilna Troupe in a blessing for Ansky and for the future of the Yiddish stage as they watch *The Dybbuk*, thus positioning the spectators as a congregation of worshippers raising their voices in supplication. The prayer suggested by Morevsky is a modified version of the Rabbis’ Kaddish (“*Kaddish D’Rabbanan*”), the prayer traditionally recited after a public reading of Talmud or other Rabbinical writings. Morevsky’s version is a fusion of the ancient Aramaic prayer on behalf of all those who study and teach Torah with a supplication for a revitalized Yiddish stage:

Mourning and entertainment??
 “To all those who engage in the study of the Torah”
 All who are engaged in metaphysical pursuits, in spirituality of every kind, –
 “In this holy place or in any other place”
 Offer in mourning their heartfelt blessing:
 “Grace, kindness, compassion, and long life”
 The Yiddish theater brings to Ansky’s work new life...
 Trembling before the task, bent beneath the yoke of moldy archaic forms, Jewish actors
 move towards the new era in the ancient Temple of beautiful art.
 Around us is the theater’s clamor - “only life, life through and through”
 In our hearts is Ansky’s unforgettable image
 “May there be grace, kindness, and compassion.”³⁵¹

Morevsky employs a familiar Yiddish linguistic device in this section that makes a connection between Yiddish theater and classical Jewish traditions of textual exegesis. The echoing of each Aramaic line with a Yiddish “equivalent” invokes the tradition of *taytsh*, a common method of studying Jewish religious texts in which students would first read aloud a line of the Talmud,

³⁵⁰ *The Dybbuk* program, Hey section.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Vov section.

then repeat a rough translation of that same line in Yiddish vernacular.³⁵² Here Morevsky's *taytsh* translation is not simply between high Hebrew and vernacular Yiddish, but between the ancient language of liturgical text and the modern Yiddish of the artistic visionary. The implication is that both are ultimately equal: that Yiddish theater can be the contemporary equivalent of ancient liturgy, and that *The Dybbuk* can serve precisely the same function as the Kaddish: memorializing the departed by magnifying the divine presence.

In adopting the Rabbis' Kaddish as the basis of his prayer for the Yiddish theater, Morevsky likewise suggests that the Vilna Troupe's production of *The Dybbuk* is metaphorically analogous to the canonized body of oral Jewish law [*Torah shel ba'al peh*]. Just as the Oral Law provides its listeners with rabbinically authorized interpretations of the Written Law (the Torah) that expand upon its original meaning, so too do the theatrical productions of the Vilna Troupe offer spectators an artistically authoritative and expansive version of a playtext. Moreover, just as the Oral Law is necessary to fully understand the Written Law, so too does the stage production complement and complete its textual ancestor. This overt fusion between modernist artistic principles and the language of Jewish religious practice sharply distinguishes the Vilna Troupe's unofficial "manifesto" from the rest of the European artistic avant-garde, which tended to be decidedly secular and to explicitly try to reject anything that was associated with traditional culture, norms, or values.

³⁵² On the *taytsh* tradition as a Yiddish linguistic feature, see Neil G. Jacobs, *Yiddish: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 295-296. On "*taytsh*" as an alternative name for the Yiddish language, see Weinreich, 316-317.

PART THREE:

EARNING CITIZENSHIP ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

The impact of the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* was not limited to Warsaw, but spanned the globe. *The Dybbuk*'s status as an international sensation only intensified as both branches of the Vilna Troupe took the play on tour throughout Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and finally, the United States, while other companies in dozens of locales produced *Dybbuk* productions of their own. The global response to *The Dybbuk* demonstrates the emerging transnational reach of the Vilna Troupe. Not only did *The Dybbuk* firmly establish modernism as a viable option for Jewish theater; but it also inaugurated the Vilna Troupe's new role as a theater company with an international reputation.

Mazo's *Dybbuk* on Tour

After over one hundred performances to full houses in Warsaw – an unprecedented triumph for a Yiddish theater company –Mazo's Vilna Troupe took *The Dybbuk* on tour across Eastern Europe, where it attracted an even wider audience. Special private train cars were reserved to carry the company, their sets, and their costumes from town to town: from Kishinev to Cracow, from Lemberg to Czernowitz, from Lodz to Belz, stopping in dozens of small *shtetlekh* along the way. It was not uncommon for impoverished rural Jews to travel great distances to see the Vilna Troupe perform, bearing a chicken or a goose in hopes of bartering the animal for a ticket.³⁵³ As the company prepared to depart each locale, they found dozens of eager amateurs at the train station hoping to join the Troupe as extras. Having been aspiring hopefuls

³⁵³ Luba Kadison recalls poor Jews coming to the theater and saying "I'll give you this chicken if you let us into the theater. We want to see *The Dybbuk*!" Luba Kadison, int. by Leah Shlanger.

themselves only a few years earlier, the actors were sympathetic. The Troupe designated a special train car for these volunteer actors, and carried and fed dozens of them.³⁵⁴

Between the performances in Warsaw and the tour, Mazo's branch of the Vilna Troupe performed *The Dybbuk* 390 times in 1921 alone, reaching approximately 200,000 theatergoers in the span of a single year.³⁵⁵ Dozens of notable personalities saw *The Dybbuk* as it toured across Poland, Romania, Transylvania, Bessarabia, and Czechoslovakia that first year, among them the Polish director Juliusz Osterwa (1885–1947). Osterwa was so inspired by seeing his first Yiddish production that he asked Mazo if he could work with the Vilna Troupe on a collaborative staging of Wyspiański's *The Judges*, a play in which a Jewish innkeeper is tried for murder, with the actors of the Vilna Troupe playing the Jews and the Polish actors from his experimental company Teatr Reduta playing the Christian characters.³⁵⁶ The following year, the Vilna Troupe opened its new season in Vienna with *The Dybbuk*. In attendance during the first week of performances were major Yiddish literary personages, among them the famous New York-based Yiddish playwright Dovid Pinski, who happened to be visiting Vienna at the time, alongside notables from leading Austrian and German theaters, including the opera singers Enrico Caruso and Leo Slezak, the playwrights Arthur Schnitzler and Richard Beer-Hoffman, and the famed director of Berlin's Deutsches Theater, Max Reinhardt. Reinhardt was so deeply affected by *The Dybbuk* that he insisted on visiting with the Vilna Troupe actors backstage to congratulate them in person. "This is no mere play," he told them, echoing the sentiment of Warsaw's critics. "It is

³⁵⁴ See Buloff, Kadison, and Genn, 33.

³⁵⁵ Waislitz, "Der gang in der velt," 41. There are no exact figures available on how many people saw *The Dybbuk* in its first year, but Waislitz's estimate is likely close to accurate.

³⁵⁶ Maya Peretz, "Jewish Theatre in Poland Before the Second World War: its Audiences and its Critics." *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 13 (2000), 359. Indeed, as Michael Steinlauf has written, most Polish artists and intellectuals were remarkably unaware of the modern Jewish culture emerging within their country until *The Dybbuk*. See Steinlauf, "'Fardibekt!'", 241.

a religious rite [*Gottesdienst*].”³⁵⁷ Reinhardt was so impressed with Morevsky’s portrayal of Azriel Miropoler, the Hasidic wonder-working Rebbe, that he invited the young actor to star in a new production of *King Lear* with the Deutsches Theater; Morevsky was flattered by the famous director’s interest, but turned down the offer, preferring to continue performing with the Vilna Troupe in Yiddish.³⁵⁸ Vienna’s German critics likewise expressed their enthusiasm about the Vilna Troupe’s *Dybbuk*. For Vienna’s German-speaking Jewish intellectuals, *The Dybbuk* was a complete revelation about the “flowering of [a] new Jewish art.”³⁵⁹ For the Hebrew writer Moshe Ya’akov Ben-Gavriel, one of Vienna Jewry’s most prominent figures who had always shunned the theater as lowbrow entertainment, *The Dybbuk* demonstrated that theater did indeed have a role to play in modern Jewish life. “I have had no relationship with the theater in the past, and nobody could convince me otherwise,” wrote Ben-Gavriel in his diary, “but when they played *The Dybbuk*, I forgot it was theater. I was shaken to the depths of my soul, truly shaken, the ten or fifteen times that I attended the production. [...] They are actors no longer, they are something else that goes much farther. And the play is no play, it is a medieval woodcut come to life, which borders upon ancient art, that of ancient primordial mysticism.”³⁶⁰ Ben-Gavriel’s description of his symbolic conversion to the theater as a mode of spiritual awakening was echoed by dozens of German-Jewish writers and intellectuals who found themselves inspired by the Vilna Troupe’s *Dybbuk* to embrace the idea of a Jewish art with twin religious and national implications.

³⁵⁷ See Buloff, Kadison, and Genn, 43-44 and Lisa Silverman, “Max Reinhardt Between Yiddish Theatre and the Salzburg Festival” in Jeanette R. Malkin and Freddie Rokem, *Jews and the Making of Modern German Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 197-218. Silverman’s article situates Reinhardt’s comments to the Vilna Troupe in light of his recent involvement in Catholicly inflected theatrical productions, including his staging of the baroque play *Jedermann* (*Everyman*) on the steps of the Catholic Cathedral in Salzburg (197-199).

³⁵⁸ Elkin, “Di Vilner,” 20.

³⁵⁹ Otto Abeles, theater critic for the German-Jewish daily *Wiener Morgenzeitung*. Quoted in Armin A. Wallas, “Jiddisches Theater: Das Gastspiel der Wilnaer Truppe in Wien 1922/23” in *Das Jüdische Echo: Zeitschrift für Kultur und Politik* 44 (1995): 183.

³⁶⁰ From Ben-Gavriel’s diary, November 1, 1922. Wallas, 183-184.

A Western European *Dybbuk*

Hundreds of miles from Vienna, the second group of actors who called themselves “the Vilna Troupe” watched as their former colleagues were catapulted to international fame. Azro and Alomis’ Vilna Troupe, in contrast, had met with little success since their hasty departure from the original company. The Vilna they found upon their return home was not the same city they had left a year earlier. While Azro and Alomis were touring Poland with the Vilna Troupe, their hometown had changed hands six additional times since the departure of the German army in 1918, its jurisdiction passing back and forth between Lithuanian independence fighters, the Polish Army, and military forces from the newly established Soviet Union.³⁶¹ In a city once again steeped in political uncertainty and economic desperation, the second branch of the Vilna Troupe spent its first few months contending with dwindling audiences and finances, and Azro and Alomis struggled to convince their fellow renegade actors that they had made the right choice. In the summer of 1920, they somehow managed to bring aboard new defectors who had tired of Mazo’s leadership, among them director Dovid Herman.³⁶² Herman approached Azro and Alomis about staging an innovative production of Ansky’s *Dybbuk*, to which they agreed, and the members of Azro and Alomis’ branch began preparing the script.

But the new company’s continued existence was suddenly thrown into question when, following a brief respite of relative peace, the Bolsheviks invaded Lithuania and the Poles fled. Faced with the all-too-familiar scenario of living under a new military occupation, several of Azro and Alomis’ new troupemates (including Herman) fled back to Warsaw, where they

³⁶¹ On Vilna during the Polish-Soviet War and the Lithuanian Wars of Independence, see Alfred E. Senn, *The Great Powers, Lithuania and the Vilna Question, 1920-1928* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966) and Alfonsas Eidintas, Vytautas Žalys, and Edvardas Tuskenis, eds., *Lithuania in European Politics: The Years of the First Republic, 1918-1940* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998).

³⁶² The other late defectors from Mazo’s troupe who joined the second Vilna Troupe in 1920 were Shniur, Norvid, Shidlo, and Gertner. Together with the original defectors Azro, Alomis, Birnboym, Zhelazo, Taytlboym, Kon, Sherman, Nomi, Arzshevskia, and Sniegov, this was the makeup of the second Vilna Troupe.

rejoined Mazo's Vilna Troupe.³⁶³ The reworked *Dybbuk* script came with them. When the Bolsheviks turned over power to the Lithuanians five weeks later, three of the remaining actors followed them to Moscow.³⁶⁴ Fearing the return of the Polish army and the inevitable bloody battles that would follow, Azro, Alomis, and the remaining small contingent of actors fled inland to Kovne, where they tried with little luck to reconvene their twice-exiled branch of the Vilna Troupe.³⁶⁵

We can imagine the emotional turmoil of Azro and Alomis upon learning of their former colleagues' sensational success with *The Dybbuk* in the immediate aftermath of their own company's dissolution. As Mazo took his Vilna Troupe on tour across Eastern Europe and *The Dybbuk*'s reputation went international, Azro and Alomis suddenly found themselves with no theater company to account for their years of hard work. Jealous, the luckless couple watched from the sidelines as their former troupemates achieved a level of international acclaim that none of them had ever imagined possible for a Yiddish theater company.

Not surprisingly, as the exiled actors began to dream of reconvening their company and starting over again, they began to plan their own *Dybbuk* premiere that would capitalize on the extraordinary reception of Mazo's Warsaw hit.

In the summer of 1921, nearly a full year after the dissolution of their company, Azro and Alomis moved to Berlin, never again to return to Eastern Europe. Berlin in 1921 was an emerging center of modern Jewish culture and home to many intellectuals who had fled Eastern

³⁶³ Upon leaving Vilna, Herman convinced local Vilna actor Avrom Morevsky (unaffiliated with either Vilna Troupe at this point) to join him in returning to Mazo's company. Herman and Morevsky would both later become famous for their collaboration on *The Dybbuk*. Zylbercweig, 1:708.

³⁶⁴ Ibid. There are competing explanations for why these actors went to Moscow, but Zylbercweig notes that the three actors in question (Shidlo, Gertner, and Norvid) were forced to go when they were drafted into the Bolshevik army.

³⁶⁵ Elkin, "Di Vilner," 19.

Europe during the First World War, including major Yiddish and Hebrew writers like Dovid Frishman, H.D. Nomberg, Chaim Nakhman Bialik, and Dovid Bergelson. It was in this burgeoning cultural milieu that Azro and Alomis encountered an enthusiastic circle of German-Jewish intellectuals who had followed the growing fame of Mazo's Vilna Troupe closely and vowed to help the couple re-establish their own Vilna Troupe branch in Berlin. This group of supporters included the German writers Herman Struck, Hans Goslar, and Arnold Zweig, who had helped Azro and Kadison to found the original Vilna Troupe in German-occupied Vilna, as well as German theater and film directors Henrik Galeen and John Gottowt, both of whom had trained under Max Reinhardt.³⁶⁶ These prominent figures used their influence to raise funds and to secure a theater building for the company: the Herrnfeld-Theater on the Kommandantenstrasse. They also began to drum up support for the Vilna Troupe among local politicians, cultural leaders, and newspaper editors before Azro and Alomis had even recruited a single actor. Thus armed with a beautiful theater space, adequate finances, and the unequivocal support of Berlin's cultural elite, Azro and Alomis reached out to the original members of the Vilna Troupe now scattered throughout Eastern Europe and invited them to come to Berlin. Most of the former members of their short-lived second branch joined them, just as Azro and Alomis had hoped; more surprising, however, was that several new actors defected from Mazo's company in order to join the group organizing in Berlin.³⁶⁷ Among the renegades was Dovid Herman, now internationally renowned as the director of *The Dybbuk*. Though Azro and Alomis' company officially operated under the name "Jüddisches Künstlertheater" ("Jewish Art Theater"), explicitly linking their work to the Moscow Art Theater and other companies like it,

³⁶⁶ Elkin, "Di Vilner," 20.

³⁶⁷ Former members of the Azro/Alomis Vilna-based company who came to Berlin included: Chaim Shniur, Lazer Zhelazo, Bela Belarina, Frida Blumental, Herz Grosbard, and Moyshe Feder. From Mazo's company, the new Berlin group acquired Rosa Birnboym and Dovid Herman.

they also strategically employed both the Vilna Troupe name and the famous Vilna Troupe logo throughout their publicity materials, implicitly suggesting to audiences that they were indeed the Vilna Troupe that had attracted so much international attention. With a company that featured several actors and directors made famous by Mazo's company, and a repertoire that consisted primarily of renowned Vilna Troupe hits imported by Herman and the others straight from Warsaw, it was no wonder that many in Berlin believed that Azro and Alomis' company was in fact *the* esteemed Vilna Troupe, exported at long last to the West.

And so, a new organization of actors operating under the now-famous name "the Vilna Troupe" developed its own productions of the Warsaw Vilna Troupe's classics with the cultured tastes of Jewish and non-Jewish Western European audiences firmly in mind: Hirschbein's *The Abandoned Inn*, *Carcass*, and *Green Fields*; Dovid Pinski's *Yankl the Blacksmith*; Leon Kobrin's *The Village Lad*; H.D. Nomberg's *The Family*; and, of course, *The Dybbuk*, which opened in September of 1921.

This second *Dybbuk* production was a virtual copy of the original, albeit with an entirely different cast. Herman, fresh off the heels of an extraordinary success that he hoped to repeat in Western Europe, kept his original direction entirely intact for this production, and trained the actors to emulate the mannerisms, speech patterns, and gestural language that Morevsky, Orleska, and the other members of Mazo's company had made famous. In place of Kadison's expressionist sets, Herman hired German-Jewish expressionist painter and graphic artist Jakob Steinhardt (who later became famous as a member of the Bezalel art school in Jerusalem) to produce an exact copy of the original set design. For the next eight months, spectators flocked to the Kommandantenstrasse Theater to see the new company that billed themselves as "The Vilna Troupe" perform the famous *Dybbuk*.

Audience members and critics, both Jewish and non-Jewish, responded to this *Dybbuk* production with unambiguous enthusiasm.³⁶⁸ This time, the critics almost unanimously agreed that the production's employment of modernist techniques was the reason for its success. Reviewers of the Berlin production sharply criticized Ansky's skills as a playwright even as they praised Herman's artistic vision.³⁶⁹ The critical consensus was that *The Dybbuk* was a successful rehabilitation of a flawed play rather than a loyal production of a masterpiece. *The Dybbuk*, lamented one Yiddish critic in a typical review, is a play

[...] hastily thrown together with naive, childish devices, without tension, movement, or expression. [...] The best that is in *The Dybbuk* is the excellent direction of Mr. Dovid Herman. He correctly staged the play not as a drama but as a film-like performance and, as much as possible, put aside the language of the play and drew back out that which was silent.³⁷⁰

That is to say, Herman was praised for downplaying Ansky's dialogue in favor of highlighting visual elements and mood. "I have strong doubts about the dramatic-artistic worth of this play," wrote another reviewer for the Yiddish press, "[...] it requires the director's complete spiritual attention in order to bring out the play's mystical mood without allowing the spectator to suspect it for a single instant."³⁷¹ Herman's production of *The Dybbuk*, then, succeeded not because of its

³⁶⁸ On the reception of Yiddish theater in Germany during this period, see Delphine Bechtel, "Yiddish Theatre and its Impact on the German and Austrian Stage" in *Jews and the Making of Modern German Theatre*, 77-98. As Bechtel demonstrates, German audiences were particularly fascinated with the ensemble quality of the Yiddish theaters of this period. Furthermore, Bechtel suggests, Yiddish theater practitioners served as key cultural mediators between the German theater and the Russian and Polish theaters of Eastern Europe.

³⁶⁹ I am including in this category Warsaw-based Yiddish critics who traveled to Berlin to see the second Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* production. See A. Foygl [Yehezkel-Moyshe Nayman], "'Das ist der Dibuk', oder der 'Dibek' in Berlin." *Haynt*, 7 November 1921, 2.

³⁷⁰ A.S. Lirik, "Der 'Dibek' in Berlin iz a durkhfal." *Der tog*, 16 December 1921, 3. Lirik, writing for the New York Yiddish daily *Tog*, suggested that German critics and audiences had difficulty understanding *The Dybbuk*. The evidence from the overwhelmingly positive German press about the production, combined with Azro and Alomis' eight-month engagement in Berlin, suggests otherwise. See, for example, Arnold Zweig's *Jüden auf der deutschen Bühne* (Berlin: Heine-Bund, 1927), 269-275.

³⁷¹ Dr. Anzelm Klaynman, "Der Dibek in Nyu York un in Berlin: A por farglaykhende batrakhtungen." *Yidish teater* 4-5 (March/April 1922): 31.

playtext, but in spite of it. Indeed, the reviewer continued, Ansky's dialogue was actually remarkably ill-suited to the play and required substantial modifications from the director:

He [Herman] also fragmented the pace of the monologues and dialogue with a half-declamatory, whispering, ecstatic, and storybook tone. The wordless melodies [*nigunim*] seem accidental, interrupted, fragmentary, the theatrical imagery seems primitive and semi-cohesive, *in a futuristic-modernist style, as a modern story requires*. From these efforts, the entire play becomes spiritual, otherworldly, visionary, just like, for example, Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Sunken Bell*, Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, [...] and the like."³⁷²

Herman's modernist *Dybbuk* transformed a Jewish legend into a universal drama that could be compared to the masterpieces of renowned European playwrights. Modern theater, this reviewer suggested, requires the adoption of precisely this "futurist-modernist" style.

This time too, German drama critics agreed with their Yiddish-language counterparts. Alfred Kerr, the esteemed drama critic for the *Berliner Tageblatt* who was nicknamed "*Kulturpapst*" ("Cultural Pope") for his role as arbiter of Berlin's theatrical and literary culture, described a "first rate" production that "bustles like an eerie ballet."³⁷³ Felix Stössinger, writing for *Die Freiheit*, called *The Dybbuk* "the most wonderful folk poetry" representing only "a tiny part of the beauty and creative wisdom of the ghetto."³⁷⁴ Another reviewer writing for the *Hamburger Echo* lauded *The Dybbuk* as a play that "brings us closer to the archetype of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*," invoking Wagner's vision of a Total Work of Art that offers the spectator a completely immersive experience.³⁷⁵ In addition to praising *The Dybbuk* as a groundbreaking production that expanded the possibilities for the modernist stage, virtually every review in the

³⁷² Klaynman, 31-32. My emphasis.

³⁷³ Quoted in Salcia Landmann, "*Der Dibbuk von An-Ski. Zur Aufführungsgeschichte*" in An-ski, *Der Dibbuk: Dramatische Jüdische Legende* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1976), 109. Originally published in the *Berliner Tageblatt*, October 27, 1921.

³⁷⁴ Quoted in Hemmerle, 295.

³⁷⁵ Ibid. Originally published in "Jüdisches Theater in den Kammerspielen," *Hamburger Echo*, August 11, 1922.

German press followed the Yiddish press in naming Herman, not Ansky, as the artistic genius behind the play's triumph.

After eight months of playing to packed houses, Azro and Alomis' Vilna Troupe, flush with success, left Berlin in May of 1922 and embarked on a grand tour of Western Europe. Across England, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, *The Dybbuk* continued to be a sensation, inspiring effusive accolades among audiences and critics who lacked even the most basic understanding of Yiddish. The Vilna Troupe's success among non-Jewish audiences in Vilna, Berlin, and across Germany could be explained, in part, by the strong overlap between Yiddish and German vocabulary. German-speaking spectators did not need to speak Yiddish to follow the plot of a Vilna Troupe play, and the company could thus count on audiences having a basic understanding of the storyline and dialogue regardless of each individual's linguistic background.³⁷⁶ With only a cursory synopsis provided in the program, German-speaking audiences could still be expected to understand the gist of the play.³⁷⁷ Similarly, Mazo's Vilna Troupe had benefitted from a deeply entwined Polish-Jewish cultural milieu, in which Yiddish was familiar to most spectators as a major regional language spoken by well over a third (and in some cases, more than half) of the population of many large Polish cities and towns.

Upon leaving Germany, the members of Azro and Alomis' Vilna Troupe had to contend for the first time with performing before audiences wholly unacquainted with Yiddish. This only further cemented the company's commitment to staging visually-appealing and highly theatrical productions that emphasized gesture, movement, color, emotion, and mood over plot and

³⁷⁶ Delphine Bechtel notes that Yiddish theater was welcomed more enthusiastically in Germany and Austria than Russian theater during the 1920s, and suggests that the accessibility of the Yiddish language played a major role in its success among German-speakers. Bechtel, 93.

³⁷⁷ A copy of the program for the 1921 Berlin production of *The Dybbuk* is preserved in the joint personal archive of Azro and Alomis at YIVO (RG 729, Folder 11).

dialogue, and further encouraged them to foreground *The Dybbuk* and other modernist productions over the realist classics from their old repertoire. This strategy proved quite successful with Western European spectators, and the company quickly attracted an enormous following unusual for a touring theater company, let alone a group of Yiddish-speaking Jewish actors from Eastern Europe.

A few representative anecdotes illustrate the extent of the company's remarkable reception. In London, the company's performances in the Kingsway Theater sold out so quickly that the Vilna Troupe was invited to move to a larger theater space within days of their arrival in England. French intellectuals who attended the Paris premiere of *The Dybbuk*, included the poet and art critic André Salmon and French-Jewish writer Edmond Fleg.³⁷⁸ Commenting on the prevalence of noteworthy figures among the spectators, one Yiddish journalist wrote that it felt as though one was at the premiere performance of a major French play rather than a production by a traveling Jewish company.³⁷⁹ In short, Azro and Alomis' Vilna Troupe was a sensation across Western Europe – to an equal or perhaps even greater extent than Mazo's company in Warsaw.

For Azro, Alomis, and their actors, most of whom had languished in obscurity just a few months earlier, the audience response to their tour was astonishing. Even in their most idealistic conversations, these Yiddish actors had never imagined that their theater would be so readily embraced by such a large non-Jewish and non-Yiddish-speaking audience. Years later, the actors would speak of this tour as the highlight of their theatrical careers. “[It was] a truly triumphant march of Jewish art over the temples of Yefes [Noah's second son, traditionally regarded as the Biblical ancestor of the Greeks and the Europeans],” recalled actor Chaim Shniur, echoing the

³⁷⁸ N. Frank, “Di ‘Vilner’ trupe in Pariz,” *Di tsayt*, 17 October 1922, 2.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

general sense among company members that their success signified the long-awaited triumph of minority Yiddish culture over its dominant Western European counterparts.³⁸⁰

Assimilated European Jews (most of whom did not speak or understand Yiddish) also turned out in droves to see the Vilna Troupe perform. There were some unlikely conquests. On his deathbed, Max Nordau, co-founder of the World Zionist Congress and the second most famous Zionist leader in the world, defied his doctor's orders of strict bed rest and ventured to the theater to find out, as one of the actors wryly commented, "if Yiddish art and Yiddish theater were not a paradox."³⁸¹ After the show, he assured the actors that they had his support. Similarly, the assimilated Jews of Brussels were so inspired by the Vilna Troupe's visit that they founded their own Belgian Yiddish art theater immediately after the company's departure.³⁸² Albert Einstein came twice to see the Vilna Troupe perform, in Berlin and in Paris, and gave the actors one of his books as a present, in which he inscribed the dedication: "You are the sculptors of the human spirit."³⁸³

European critics, in turn, declared the Vilna Troupe's work to be so compelling that it transcended language itself. This trope, that the Vilna Troupe could be appreciated by virtually anyone, was frequently invoked by a European press eager to claim the company as its own. In London, a reviewer for the *Manchester Guardian* wrote of *The Dybbuk*: "Sympathy, intellect, intensity, gesture, speech, silence – all are wrought into that harmony which speaks to our souls in a language that is not the language of the spoken word, but *the tongue of humanity* making its

³⁸⁰ "Ven Khayim Shniur un Bela Belarina hobn geshpilt dem Dibek in Pariz." *Lodzer togblat*, 17 January 1930. Bella Bellarina Papers (RG 574), Box 2, Scrapbook, YIVO.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² See A. Dorf, "Tsu der geshikhte fun yidishn teater," *Inzl*, 1922. Azro and Alomis Papers (RG 729), Folder 11, YIVO.

³⁸³ Ibid.

appeal to our hearts.”³⁸⁴ “There was no need to understand Yiddish,” hailed another critic, “The intensity of the players, their mobility of feature, responsive as it is to every emotion, make plain to all the meaning of the words they utter.”³⁸⁵ Of *Carcass*, a reviewer for the London paper *The Star* wrote: “I am completely ignorant of Yiddish, [...] but much of the meaning was clear to me, and I was held by the performance. The skill of the actors prevails over the barrier of language.”³⁸⁶ When *The Dybbuk* premiered in Paris, an established drama critic for the French Communist press lamented to the correspondent for the Yiddish *Forverts* sitting beside him that he wished he could understand Yiddish.³⁸⁷ He went on to write a laudatory review contending that the acting of the Vilna Troupe was so perfect that the language barrier simply did not matter.

Not only did Western European drama critics argue that the appeal of Azro and Alomis’ Vilna Troupe extended well beyond the bounds of the Yiddish-speaking Jewish community, but they also suggested to their countrymen that these Yiddish actors had accomplished something beyond what their own theater artists had achieved. Earlier reviews in the non-Jewish presses of Vilna, Warsaw, and the Polish provinces, tended to feature the critic’s astonishment at discovering a Yiddish theater on par with its local counterparts. But in Western Europe, reviewers went one step further and argued that the Vilna Troupe was, in fact, a theater company *well ahead* of its contemporaries in virtually every arena. “Seven plays have been presented with such studied and self-less ensemble, such reticent and cultivated talent, that *it seems improbable that acting of such importance has ever been seen within the memory of living man*,” wrote one

³⁸⁴ January 2, 1923. Copied and retyped by Alexander Azro and preserved in his archive (RG 729), Folder 11, YIVO. My emphasis.

³⁸⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, December 29, 1922. Ibid.

³⁸⁶ “Kingsway Theatre: Yiddish Players in ‘The Knacker,’” *The Star*, October 28, 1922. Bella Bellarina Papers (RG 574), Box 2, YIVO.

³⁸⁷ L. Blumenfeld. “Di barimte Vilner trupe shpilt itst in Pariz,” *Forverts*, November 3 1922, 3.

critic of the *Vilner's* London visit.³⁸⁸ Another favorably compared the Troupe to none other than the Moscow Art Theater, stating "My wildest dreams of the Moscow Art Theatre never conjured up such a performance."³⁸⁹ Others hailed their acting as "perfect," "miraculous," and "astonishing." J.T. Grein, the founding director of London's Independent Theater Society, hailed the Vilna Troupe as the cutting edge of the future. "If you are seeking something fresh in the field of art," he advised readers in the *Illustrated London News*, "you will find it here."³⁹⁰ Even more astounding, Western European reviewers concurred that the Vilna Troupe could teach European actors a lesson in cutting-edge acting style and techniques. The English critics were particularly vocal in calling upon London's actors to emulate the Vilna Troupe.

If the Vilna Troupe could give a special matinee for London actors and actresses, they would be doing good work. I should like our players to see the methods of this Yiddish company. What our players should note is the strength of the comedy acting, which never becomes exaggerated or unnatural. The ensemble [method] of the company is wonderful.³⁹¹

Very good acting and excellent team-work. Perhaps the perfect *ensemble* is the salient feature of the Jewish Art Theatre. A performance which we can sincerely recommend, even to Gentile playgoers, as to what careful production, sound training, and a perfect ensemble can do.³⁹²

The Vilna company are perfect actors. Those who care about the art of acting can still seize a rare pleasure. I have seldom seen individual acting so precise and vigorous, and never better orchestrated into a complete harmonious event. [...] We often heard three or four men and women speaking at once, as people do when they are quarreling or in moments of excited discussion. How often do you hear that done on the English stage? Here one can observe how it ought to be done.³⁹³

³⁸⁸ Walter Sickert, "The Yiddish Players in London," Copied and retyped by Alexander Azro and preserved in his papers (RG 729), Folder 11, YIVO. My emphasis.

³⁸⁹ H. Fa, "Great Acting: The Vilna Players in 'The Knacker' at the Kingsway," *Daily Herald*, 28 October 1922. Bella Bellarina Papers (RG 574), Box 2, YIVO.

³⁹⁰ "Some London Press Opinions". Publicity sheet printed to advertise the Vilna Troupe's London residency. Ibid.

³⁹¹ "A Lesson in Acting: What the Vilna Troupe Could Teach Our Players." *Daily News*, 4 November 1922. Ibid.

³⁹² *Morning Post*, 27 October 1922. Ibid.

³⁹³ *New Statesman*, reprinted in "Some London Press Opinions."

In calling upon English actors to follow the aesthetic lead of the visiting Yiddish players, these reviewers suggested a new hierarchy in which the “advanced” Yiddish theater could be as a model for the “backwards” European stage. This was in sharp contrast to the traditional anxieties of Yiddish intellectuals about a Jewish theater that lagged far behind its peers. Predictably, the Yiddish drama critics following the Vilna Troupe’s tour of Western Europe trumpeted this new hierarchy. “Dozens of English artists have become great devotees [*khasidim*] of the Vilna Troupe and of the Yiddish theater!” boasted a journalist for the London Yiddish press, likening the enthusiasm over the Vilna Troupe to religious fervor.³⁹⁴

The Vilna Troupe emerged during a period of relative European toleration for Jewish culture, to which it contributed and from which it benefitted. Still, anti-Jewish sentiments were rampant in parts of Western Europe, and it was here that the *Vilner* encountered their first taste of overt prejudice. One of their first Parisian reviewers was the journalist Jean Dreux of the notoriously anti-Semitic paper *La Libre Parole*. In a venomous review entitled “Synagogue-Theater,” Dreux suggested that *The Dybbuk* was part of a joint Jewish-Freemason conspiracy to infiltrate French culture and sharply criticized the manager of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées for allowing Jewish performers to take over such an important theater. Dreux was particularly horrified by the scenes that took place in the synagogue. Without understanding what the actors were saying, he wondered, how could critics be sure that they were not mocking French culture?³⁹⁵ Overtly hostile and anti-Semitic reviews like Dreux’s were an unusual occurrence, though there were occasional lapses into subtle anti-Semitic invective even among those who

³⁹⁴ “Vet di Vilner trupe blaybn in London?” Esther Rokhl Kaminska Theater Museum Collection (RG 8), Box 60, YIVO.

³⁹⁵ See Blumenfeld, 3.

fervently embraced the Vilna Troupe. “The language does not matter. The skill of the artists overcomes its harshness and oddities,” wrote one English journalist, implying no small measure of astonishment that such a high level of “perfectly artistic” theater could overcome the harsh sounds of the actors’ strange language.³⁹⁶ Another London reviewer, who lauded the company as an “extraordinary troupe,” also suggested that perhaps their manager had strategically lengthened the intermissions between the acts to enable members of the audience to conduct business, invoking familiar anti-Semitic accusations of a Jewish obsession with money.³⁹⁷

Still, the vast majority of European reviewers lauded the Vilna Troupe in unequivocal terms. Support for the company was remarkably consistent during this European tour, and Azro and Alomis’ Vilna Troupe received surprisingly few negative reviews in spite of the significant linguistic and cultural barriers between the performers and their audiences. This begs the question: was the effusive praise for the Vilna Troupe actually justified? Were its performances really so “perfect” or *The Dybbuk*’s modernist aesthetic quite so cutting-edge as the critics described? The reviews seem to suggest that these types of questions seemed secondary or even irrelevant to most of the Vilna Troupe’s supporters. The very existence of a “serious” Yiddish art theater like the Vilna Troupe, its actors’ familiarity with modern European drama and contemporary theatrical trends, their ability to create visually inventive productions that could hold the attention of non-Yiddish-speaking spectators, the number of influential writers and artists who publicly supported their work – taken together, these factors surprised and delighted non-Jewish European critics, regardless of the actual artistic value of the productions themselves. For most of these reviewers, unfamiliar with the rise of a sophisticated modern Yiddish culture in

³⁹⁶ *Westminster Gazette*, 27 October 1922, reprinted in “Some London Press Opinions.”

³⁹⁷ “Di Grine Felder: Jewish Arts Theatre Players,” *Sunday Times*, 19 November 1922. Esther Rokhl Kaminska Theater Museum Collection (RG 8), Box 61, YIVO.

Eastern Europe, a sense of astonishment at the Vilna Troupe's very existence was an integral part of their enigmatic attraction. As one Dutch critic put it:

Where do these miracle-makers come from? Are they Polish, Russian, Lithuanian? What language do they speak? *Who inducted them into the deepest and yet most intelligible secrets of the art of theater?* Do they come from an old generation of actors or did they learn all this on their own? Yes, what is their name and where do they get their repertoire?³⁹⁸

This aura of mystery contributed significantly to the Vilna Troupe's allure. The very fact that its language and culture were so unfamiliar to their European audiences compounded the impact of the company's presence in Western Europe, regardless of the quality of each individual production.

Similarly, these critics described the Vilna Troupe as an intriguing alternative to a traditional Western European understanding of Jewish culture. "A brand new, friendly image comes to us of these Eastern Israelites, which the West Europeans had considered a people only of trading and peddling," read one Berlin review of the pastoral drama *Grine felder*. "Here we see fresh, vigorous, unspoiled people working on the land and in their family life."³⁹⁹ In Hamburg, another critic similarly wrote of the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* as "elevat[ing] the level of absolute humanity" with an artistry that offered Western European audiences "a wonderfully poignant insight into the folklore of Eastern European Jewry, which certainly does not deserve popular contempt, but is as good as any other."⁴⁰⁰ *The Dybbuk*, with its explicitly modernist agenda coupled with its depictions of a traditional Jewish life that seemed exotic to many

³⁹⁸ Habitue, "Nieuwe: Het Jüdisches Küstlertheater. Een Geweldig Tooneelgebeuren," *Haagsche Post*, 1 July 1922. Esther Rokhl Kaminska Theater Museum Collection (RG 8), Box 60, YIVO. Translated by Lena Vanelslender. My emphasis.

³⁹⁹ Hemmerle, 296. Originally published in the *Berliner Allgemeine Zeitung*, 18 February 1922.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 294. Originally published as "Kunst, Wissenschaft, und Leben" in the *Hamburger Echo* by an anonymous author, 9 May 1922.

Europeans, owed its success on this tour largely to its power to astonish European spectators and challenge their expectations about Jewish culture.

The success of Azro and Alomis's company in Western Europe was also due to its being one of the few conduits of theatrical ideas between Eastern and Western Europe during this period. The actors' diverse backgrounds (training in Russian and Polish drama schools, experience performing in Eastern and Western European theaters both 'high' and 'low', apprenticeships under experimental directors in Russia, Poland, Germany and Austria) combined with the Vilna Troupe's new focus on experimenting with its own aesthetic enabled the *Vilner* to carry theatrical ideas across borders as they traveled. Not all of these ideas were equally innovative – some of what the European critics lauded was indeed novel, while other elements were direct imitations of strategies that had already emerged on the Eastern European stage. Still, this somewhat falsely enhanced sense of the Vilna Troupe's artistic creativity helped spur its reception in Western Europe.

Finally, the Vilna Troupe's achievements during this first Western European tour were likewise propelled by the ongoing positive press about Mazo's branch, which was simultaneously performing in Austria, Romania, and throughout Eastern Europe. Though each steadfastly refused to acknowledge the other's existence, the two branches of the Vilna Troupe reinforced each other's position by framing the company as a global sensation.

A Movement Emerges

By the time Azro and Alomis' Vilna Troupe returned to Germany in May of 1923 to develop new repertoire for the upcoming season, their fame had so far outpaced that of the Eastern European branch of the Vilna Troupe that they were able to recruit seven more of

Mazo's best actors (Noah Nachbush, Sholem Tanin, Matisyahu Kovalski, Paula Valter, Leah Naomi, Miriam Veyde, and Moyshe Feder) to join them. Their new plays included many with strong nationalist themes, including Y.L. Peretz's *Di goldene keyt* (*The Golden Chain*) and a Yiddish translation of Friedrich Hebbel's *Judith*. After three months of intensive rehearsal, they returned to Holland, Belgium and London before setting sail for New York, becoming the first contingent of the Vilna Troupe to arrive in the United States. In the months leading up to their arrival, the New York Yiddish press printed dozens of tributes, foreign reviews, actor profiles, and speculative articles about what it would be like to see the famous Vilna Troupe in person. Their reputation had once again preceded them.

Just as the Vilna Troupe had become an international presence in the space of just a few years, so too had the idea of a Yiddish art theater – modeled directly upon the company's practices – spread rapidly throughout the global diaspora of Yiddish-speaking Jews. In the immediate aftermath of the First World War, self-proclaimed "Yiddish art theater" companies sprang up around the world. In New York, Maurice Schwartz founded his Yiddish Art Theater in 1918.⁴⁰¹ Jacob Ben-Ami, a former member of the Hirschbein Troupe, formed his own rival New York company, the Jewish Art Theater, in 1919.⁴⁰² The Freie Jüdische Volksbühne, also known as the Vienna Yiddish Art Theater, was founded in Vienna that same year.⁴⁰³ In Warsaw, director and actor Zygmunt Turkow began to recruit actors for his Warsaw Yiddish Art Theater company (known under its Yiddish acronym, VYKT) in 1922; the company began performing in 1924.⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰¹ On Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater, see Martin Boris, *Once a Kingdom: The Life of Maurice Schwartz and the Yiddish Art Theatre* (New York: self published, 2002), and Sandrow, 261-267.

⁴⁰² Sandrow, 267-270.

⁴⁰³ Elkin, "Di Vilner," 16.

⁴⁰⁴ See Mirosława Bulat, "Warsaw Yiddish Art Theater," in Gershon David Hundert, ed., *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, Vol 2. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 2004-2005; Mordkhe Shner (Shinar),

Dozens of other “Yiddish art theater” companies were founded over the course of the 1920’s, including the Varshever Nayer Yidisher Teater (VNIT, Warsaw), Davke (Vilna), the Khaveyrim Trupe (Lublin), the Chicago Dramatishe Gezelshaft, also known as the Jewish Art Players of Chicago (directed by Vilna Troupe actor Joseph Buloff), and the New York Art Troupe, among others. As these companies grew increasingly popular, “art theater” became so ubiquitous a term on the Yiddish stage that it became a blanket marketing strategy used by virtually every young artist hoping to make a career in the Yiddish theater. Misappropriation of the term was common.⁴⁰⁵

Many of the actors and directors who founded the first Yiddish art theaters after World War I had never attended a production by the Vilna Troupe or its Yiddish art theater predecessor, the Hirschbein Troupe. Still, most of these companies modeled themselves directly on the Vilna Troupe in both style and repertoire, inspired primarily by the extensive coverage of its performances in the international press. When the Vilna Troupe held fast to realism and performed the dramas of Hirschbein, Kobrin, Asch, and Pinski alongside Tolstoy, Hauptmann, Moliere, and Ibsen, the new Yiddish art theaters followed its lead. Maurice Schwartz opened the first season of his Yiddish Art Theater with Hirschbein’s *A farvorfn vinkl*, a play that had first become famous via the Vilna Troupe’s 1917 production in Vilna. In 1919, Jacob Ben-Ami opened his Jewish Art Theater with Hirschbein’s *Di puste kretshme*, another play made famous by the Vilna Troupe. Like many early productions of the Yiddish art theaters, several scenes of Ben-Ami’s *Puste kretshme* were exact copies of the Vilna Troupe’s staging.⁴⁰⁶ When the Vilna

“Varshever yidisher kunst-teater (‘VYKT’),” in *Yidisher teater in Eyrope*, 53-72; and Zygmunt Turkow, *Di ibergerisene tkufe* (Buenos Aires, 1961).

⁴⁰⁵ Lifson cites the example of the Bronx Art Theater, which staged old-fashioned musicals and melodramas in classic *shund* style. Lifson, 66-67.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 645-646.

Troupe introduced a modernist aesthetic with their production of *The Dybbuk*, the other Yiddish art theaters likewise modified their aesthetic and embraced theatrical modernism. Some Yiddish art theater companies, like the VYKT, were established just after a Vilna Troupe visit, as young actor-entrepreneurs saw an opportunity to attract its vast audience base established by imitating *Vilner* tactics and repertoire.⁴⁰⁷ For years, a shared repertoire dominated the Yiddish art theaters. New plays staged by the Vilna Troupe frequently re-emerged in the repertoires of the Yiddish Art Theater, the Jewish Art Theater, the Vienna Yiddish Art Theater, the VYKT, and other companies just a year or so later.

The sole exception was the Moscow State Yiddish Theater (Moskovskii Gosudarstvennyi Evreiskii Teatr, known by its acronym “GOSET”). Unlike the Yiddish art theaters in Europe and America, which had no formal financial support outside of the Jewish community, GOSET was a state-funded institution under the official auspices of the Soviet Union. As such, GOSET interpreted the idea of a Yiddish art theater differently from its peers, and ultimately developed its own set of goals and artistic practices that bore little relation to the model established by the Vilna Troupe. While Yiddish art theater troupes in other locales constituted a single border-crossing movement, GOSET was a separate and distinct phenomenon with its own aesthetic, and is thus outside of the purview of this project.⁴⁰⁸

What did the term “Yiddish Art Theater” signify for these companies? Like the Vilna Troupe, each Yiddish art theater defined its offerings as highbrow art, in contrast to the popular

⁴⁰⁷ See Mayzel, *Geven a mol a lebn*, 123.

⁴⁰⁸ I mention GOSET only briefly here because the company’s work has received extensive treatment elsewhere. See Jeffrey Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Béatrice Picon-Vallin, *Le théâtre juif soviétique pendant les années vingt* (Lausanne, Switzerland: La Cité, 1973); Mordechai Altshuler, ed., *Ha-Teatron ha-yehudi bi-Verit ha-Mo’atsot* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1996); and Benjamin Harshav, ed. and trans., *The Moscow Yiddish Theater: Art on Stage in the Time of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

entertainment of the *shund* stage. When asked about the use of the term “art” in the name of his company, William Mercur, the business manager for Schwartz’s Yiddish Art Theater in New York, responded: “Plays were produced meticulously, not like in the old days. We did them with great care, we discussed them thoroughly in advance.”⁴⁰⁹ For many of these artists, “art theater” simply meant productions that were superior to the standard fare offered on the Yiddish stage in the past, much like the Independent Theater movement in Europe defined itself in opposition to the prevailing norms of the commercial theater. Likewise, following the Vilna Troupe’s model, the actors and directors of these companies often spoke of their work as inspired by the Moscow Art Theater.⁴¹⁰ Over time, each Yiddish art theater company gradually developed its own distinct repertoire and aesthetic outlook. The Yiddish art theaters in the United States tended to define “art theater” in terms of literary merit, even as directors increasingly incorporated modernist strategies after 1920. When asked to define Yiddish art theater in interviews, Maurice Schwartz replied with a one-word retort: “literature.”⁴¹¹ In Europe, Yiddish art theater companies tended to focus more on experimental means of production and avant-garde aesthetics. Both strands of the movement were equally represented within the Vilna Troupes that traveled among them all.

Maurice Schwartz’s New York *Dybbuk*

In September of 1921, just nine months after the premiere of Mazo’s *Dybbuk* in Warsaw and only weeks before the opening of Azro and Alomis’ version in Berlin, Maurice Schwartz’s

⁴⁰⁹ Lifson, 48.

⁴¹⁰ When historian David Lifson asked Jacob Ben-Ami about where the idea for “Yiddish art theater” came from, Ben-Ami replied, “You must understand that most of the writers and leading figures among the Yiddish intelligentsia and theatre folk in New York were cultured Russian Jews. They associated better efforts in the theatre with the Moscow Art Theatre. Thus Yiddish theatres or troupes in New York assumed the word ‘art’ in their name to identify their efforts with the objectives of the Moscow Art Theatre.” Ibid., 34.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 57.

Yiddish Art Theater opened its own *Dybbuk* in New York. No doubt, this production was inspired by the international coverage of the Vilna Troupe's sensationally successful production. Indeed, New York's Jewish intellectuals held heated discussions about the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* based on the European reviews.⁴¹² When Schwartz announced that he too would be staging *The Dybbuk* as the opening production of the Yiddish Art Theater's 1921-22 season, these conversations grew even more intense.

The central question debated by American Yiddish writers, intellectuals, and the press was whether or not Schwartz would follow the controversial modernist model of the Vilna Troupe's staging. Some hoped for a realistic production of Ansky's play to counteract the influence of Herman's version. Others hoped that Schwartz would copy Herman's direction exactly, arguing that *The Dybbuk* was only successful because of its stylized production. "It is perhaps no accident that *The Dybbuk* was embraced only after it was produced on the stage," commented one New York Yiddish critic.⁴¹³ Still others encouraged Schwartz to make the play even more avant-garde by adopting newer techniques of futurism or surrealism.

In a brilliant publicity maneuver, Schwartz capitalized on the heightened interest surrounding his production by publishing an essay about his approach on opening night. Titled "Impressionism and Realism: Which of These Two Methods Should Be Applied to the Production of Ansky's Dramatic Legend *The Dybbuk*?" Schwartz's editorial took up the very question that New York's Yiddish theater critics had been speculating about for months. "Other directors" of *The Dybbuk*, he wrote, have tended to model their work either on Stanislavsky's

⁴¹² See Khayim Zhitlovski, "A por verter vegn Anskis Dibek," *Unzer teater* 1.1 (September 1921), 5-10 and Y. Vitkin, "Anskis 'Dibek' bay di 'Vilner,'" *Unzer lebn*, Esther Rokhl Kaminska Theater Museum Collection (RG 8), Box 60, YIVO.

⁴¹³ Vitkin.

realism or on Reinhardt's experimental impressionism. The implication was, of course, Herman – for in the fall of 1921, who else had ever directed a production of *The Dybbuk*? Schwartz's condemnation of these unnamed "other directors" who rely on Stanislavsky or Reinhardt for inspiration was thus a thinly veiled reference to both the Vilna Troupe's early productions and its newer modernist offerings. In contrast, Schwartz vowed that his *Dybbuk* would take a different approach that would be firmly grounded in a *literary* aesthetic.

I am framing Ansky's *Dybbuk*, a poetic folk Jewish legend, in the way that our great-grandfathers would have lived it and retold it. In a realistic form, with a mystical background. [...] Those who will come to see Ansky's *Dybbuk* will demand, perhaps unconsciously, an artistic translation of Ansky's play, but not artistic meddling. They will demand Ansky's style, that which reveals Ansky's creation, and vibrant artistic images. The mission of the director for a work like *The Dybbuk* is to bring out the essence of the poetic Jewish legend, with its stimulating realism, its resonant mysticism, and its heartfelt folksiness. The director must ensure that the production has artistic charm, but it must be *Jewish* charm, and not an imitation of Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird* or of a Reinhardt *Hamlet* production. First and foremost comes loyalty to the spirit of the work, and that is what I seek to provide.⁴¹⁴

Schwartz's belabored assurances that his *Dybbuk* will correct for the mistakes of past directors are full of oblique references to the Vilna Troupe. His entire approach to *The Dybbuk* was an adoption of the arguments of the play's earliest Warsaw critics, who felt, like Schwartz, that Herman had corrupted Ansky's play by deviating too far from the original text. Like many of these early critics, Schwartz highlighted the character of the Messenger as a prime example of the fallacies of the unnamed "other *Dybbuk* directors." In "some *Dybbuk* productions" (i.e. the Vilna Troupe), he wrote, the Messenger had been wrongly transformed into an enigmatic figure far outside of the world of Ansky's play. In contrast, his production would cast the Messenger as

⁴¹⁴ Maurice Schwartz, "Impresionizm un realizm: velkhe fun di tsvey metodn darf ongevendet vern in der oyffirung fun anskis dramatishe legende *Der dibek*?" *Unzer teater* 1.1 (September 1921), 10-12. My emphasis.

a simple poor man with a prophetic voice, thus evoking the familiar Jewish trope of Elijah the Prophet disguised in the garb of a beggar.⁴¹⁵

Schwartz's *Dybbuk* was a moderate success, though far from the runaway hit he had hoped for. Decades later, he wistfully wrote of the production: "I wanted to be as successful as the Vilna Troupe had been, perhaps even more so."⁴¹⁶ Still, the Yiddish Art Theater's *Dybbuk* drew large crowds during its 18-week run and earned a lengthy panegyric from none other than *The New York Times*, which raved that Schwartz's production had a "Rembrandesque quality" that rendered the play "extraordinarily vivid" and "unforgettable."⁴¹⁷ The reception of *The Dybbuk* in New York likely had little to do with Schwartz's production itself and more to do with the buildup of audience curiosity about the play after months of reading the international press about the Vilna Troupe's version. Yiddish critics were generally less enthusiastic than spectators, and many compared Schwartz's production unfavorably to Herman's two sensations in Warsaw and Berlin. The Messenger is so lifelike that his role in the play is confusing, argued one Eastern European Yiddish critic who had traveled to Berlin and New York to compare both *Dybbuk* productions. Moreover, he concluded, Schwartz's emphasis on realism had led him away from the play's essence in a production where "the play's spiritualism was sacrificed to materialism."⁴¹⁸ Disappointed in the tepid critical response to his version, Schwartz cut short *The*

⁴¹⁵ Schwartz, 11.

⁴¹⁶ Quoted in Boris, 111. Originally published in the *Forverts*, January 14, 1942.

⁴¹⁷ "Yiddish Art Theatre: 'The Dibbuk,' A Strange and Imaginative Folk Play, Acted," *The New York Times*, 2 September 1921, 15.

⁴¹⁸ Klaynman, 32.

Dybbuk's run and turned his attention towards discovering new material that had never before been presented on the Yiddish stage.⁴¹⁹

Schwartz's *Dybbuk* production is a characteristic example of how the Vilna Troupe influenced other Yiddish art theater directors around the world. The New York production of *The Dybbuk* was conceived as a direct response to the controversy over Herman's use of modernist techniques; its popular and critical reception were likewise colored by the Vilna Troupe's version. Perhaps Schwartz's *Dybbuk* would have been more successful had reviewers not had the Vilna Troupe production to compare it to. Nevertheless, in seeking to define how his Yiddish Art Theater differed from the famous Vilna Troupe, Schwartz's production ironically demonstrated just how deep and far-reaching the Vilna Troupe's influence actually ran.

Habima and *The Dybbuk*

In January of 1922, just over a year after the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* opened in Warsaw, the Moscow-based Hebrew-language theater company Habima opened its own production of Ansky's play to tremendous acclaim. *The Dybbuk* was Habima's breakthrough production, spurring its establishment as the premiere Hebrew theater company in the world. Just as Habima ultimately became the national theater of Israel, so too did Habima's *Dybbuk* become an enduring national icon for the emerging Hebrew-language culture of the Yishuv.

The members of Habima never referred to the Vilna Troupe. Their publicity for *The Dybbuk* likewise failed to even mention that the play had originally been staged in Yiddish. In choosing to disregard the play's Yiddish roots, Habima's production implicitly suggested that *The Dybbuk* belonged solely to the Hebrew-language stage, a claim that carried increased resonance after the company resettled in Tel Aviv and became the de facto national theater and

⁴¹⁹ The remainder of the 1921-22 season included H. Leivick's *Shmates* and Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. See Boris, 114-118.

The Dybbuk the de facto national play.⁴²⁰ The members of Habima wanted to create a Jewish “art theater” in Hebrew rather than in Yiddish, and as such, they sought to distinguish their work from productions on the Yiddish stage. Indeed, the stylistic tone of Habima’s *Dybbuk* was sharply distinct from both Herman’s and Schwartz’s Yiddish versions: directed by the Russian-Jewish avant-garde director Evgenii Vakhtangov, Habima’s *Dybbuk* was a fully-fledged expressionist production with a strong emphasis on the grotesque. Every gesture, costume, and set piece was larger-than-life and carefully constructed to highlight stark visual contrasts. In Vakhtangov’s *Dybbuk*, Leah’s pale face (artificially emphasized with white makeup) against her long black braid and the dark kaftans of the men surrounding her became a defining visual element. This type of visual contrasting, combined with expressionist choreography and heavily physicalized characterizations, superseded the plot and dialogue as the dominant element of the production (for the first audiences for Habima’s *Dybbuk* were, like Vakhtangov himself, non-Hebrew speakers and thus relied heavily upon visual and physical cues to make sense of the play). The result was an unabashedly modernist production that was widely regarded as *the* founding moment of the modern Hebrew stage. Unlike in Yiddish theater, there was no modernist crisis for the professional Hebrew-language stage; it was brazenly modernist almost from its inception.

Still in spite of these significant differences between Habima’s Hebrew production and the Vilna Troupe’s Yiddish one, Habima’s *Dybbuk* was deeply inspired by the Vilna Troupe’s version. It is unlikely that Habima would have considered adding *The Dybbuk* to its repertoire had it not been for the Vilna Troupe’s example. In successfully producing a play that most Jewish intellectuals had considered unstageable, the Vilna Troupe demonstrated the potential of *The Dybbuk* as a vehicle for modernist experimentation. Indeed, although Habima steadfastly

⁴²⁰ Habima was officially named the “National Theater of Israel” in 1958, and continues to hold that title to this day.

refused to acknowledge the Vilna Troupe as an influence, the two companies were remarkably similar. Both were explicitly modeled on the Moscow Art Theater, and both sought to create a prestigious Jewish theater that would spur the development of modern Jewish culture. It is thus not surprising that Habima and the Vilna Troupe shared much of the same repertoire, as Habima's first productions were almost entirely Yiddish plays (often initially staged by the Vilna Troupe) in Hebrew translation. The Yiddish dramatists who provided the core of the Vilna Troupe's repertoire – Asch, Peretz, Pinski, Hirschbein – were also staged by Habima, which tended to select plays that had been successfully produced by the Vilna Troupe just a year or two earlier.⁴²¹ Like Schwartz's *Dybbuk* and the emergence of a discrete Yiddish art theater movement, Habima's rise to prominence during the interwar period was largely predicated upon the Vilna Troupe's earlier success. Thus not only did the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* inspire the emergence of an international *Yiddish* art theater movement, but it also was a primary catalyst in the development of the modern Hebrew stage.⁴²²

PART FOUR: “THAT’S MARVELOUS! WHO WROTE IT?”

The Vilna Troupe's metamorphosis into an experimental modernist company was initially incomplete. While both Vilna Troupe branches did turn increasingly to experimental approaches in the aftermath of *The Dybbuk*, for the next few years they tended to produce

⁴²¹ See Shelly Zer-Zion, “The Birth of Habima and the Yiddish Art Theatre Movement” in *Jewish Theatre: Tradition in Transition and Intercultural Vistas*, ed. Ahuva Belkin (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2008), 73-88. While Zer-Zion's analysis is at times hindered by a lack of accurate information about the Vilna Troupe, her analysis of Habima's Yiddish theater roots is well informed and offers an important counterpoint to traditional narratives of Habima's founding, which tend to ignore the Yiddish theater context entirely.

⁴²² A decade and a half later, a film version of *The Dybbuk* (1937) would also achieve remarkable international success. See J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds* (New York: Schocken, 1991), 279-284 and Joel Rosenberg, “The Soul of Catastrophe: On the 1937 Film of S. Ansky's *The Dybbuk*,” *Jewish Social Studies* 17.2 (Winter 2011), 1-27.

stylized work alongside more traditional (i.e. realist) fare. Both companies continued to choose their repertoire based on a play's perceived literary greatness rather than its artistic flexibility.

But for a new generation of Yiddish actors, including the youngest members of the Vilna Troupe, it was cutting-edge modernism rather than literary merit that represented the apex of theatrical creativity. These younger actors, who tended to be more cosmopolitan than their elders and were well-acquainted with the avant-garde experiments being staged throughout Europe, advocated with increasing intensity for a more fully-fledged incorporation of modernist aesthetics onto the Yiddish stage. Among these artists was an ambitious 24-year-old aspiring director named Joseph Buloff, who succeeded in convincing Mordechai Mazo to allow him to stage an experimental production of Osip Dimov's *Der zinger fun zayn troyer* [*The Singer of His Sorrow*] in 1924. This production signified the culmination of the aesthetic shift that the company had begun a few years earlier with *The Dybbuk*. Many Vilna Troupe productions in the early 1920's either reverted to the company's original naturalist approach or tried to reproduce the specific tone of *The Dybbuk* with little success (indeed, both Mazo's and Azro/Alomis' Vilna Troupes were heavily criticized in the years immediately following *The Dybbuk*'s success for incorporating visual and gestural elements drawn from Ansky's play into other pieces where they did not belong).⁴²³ Buloff sought to take the company in a new direction.

The piece was a hard sell. *Singer* was a simplistic and somewhat naive play about an impoverished musician and his unrequited love, and Mazo questioned Buloff's choice of material when there were other, more complex plays available. But Buloff was persistent, explaining to Mazo that the subject matter of the play itself was insignificant. His staging would use the script only as a vehicle for creating a completely new piece that he had come up with in

⁴²³ The actress Miriam Orleska was particularly notorious for bringing aspects of *The Dybbuk*'s Leah into every role she played. See Turkow-Grudberg, *Yidish teater in Poyln*, 50-51.

his mind, and he would rework Dimov's script entirely in order to project the concept he envisioned. When Mazo at last agreed, Buloff set to work, not as a director, as he recalled, but as a writer, "roll[ing] up my sleeves and rework[ing] the script to fit my own conception."⁴²⁴

Dimov's play centers around a simple love triangle and a touching, if predictable, tearjerker plot about a poor musician named Yoshke who wins the lottery and gives away the winnings to his beloved, who promptly uses the money to snare her upper-class beau. At the end of the play, having lost both his fortune and his bride, Yoshke becomes a beggar and goes mad.

Buloff's version completely recontextualized this simple plot with an elaborate prologue that highlighted the very childlike naiveté that is the weakness of Dimov's drama. The production opens with a grandmother telling a bedtime story to her grandchild. Suddenly, the grandmother transforms into Yoshke and the play begins, causing the audience to view the entire story through the eyes of the child. As such, everything in the play is larger than life, abstract, dream-like. An old chicken vendor is herself costumed as a hen. A chimney sweep makes all of his entrances and exits directly through the stove. Even Yoshke's makeup resembled the shape of the fiddle he carried. Larger than life facial features (extra eyelashes drawn on his face with dark eye pencil, exaggerated eyebrows and lips, and bright red spots on both cheeks) completed the clown-like expressionist effect. Similarly exaggerated costumes and colorful masks with huge, overpowering features were employed by nearly every character to heighten the effect.

To further intensify the dream-like quality of the production, Buloff staged the entire play in the kitchen where the grandmother's story begins. Each wall of the set had dozens of holes in it, through which countless pairs of anonymous eyes observed the characters' every move. Two large group scenes involving the entire cast, one when crowds gather to tell Yoshke that he has won the lottery, the other when the beggars make Yoshke one of their own, were tightly

⁴²⁴ Buloff, Kadison, and Genn, 50.

choreographed and used grotesque facial expressions and movement to great effect. All of this was a major departure from the original script.

Like Herman with *The Dybbuk*, Buloff faced significant opposition to his modernist innovations early on. The Vilna Troupe actors, particularly the older members who had been part of the original company, were extremely skeptical about taking part in such an unconventional production of a play that was widely acknowledged as poorly written. The actors frequently grumbled about their roles, and Mazo too found himself questioning whether he had made the right choice in allowing Buloff to direct the piece. But the actors' complaints disappeared after the first performance in light of the enthusiastic response from audiences and critics. At one of the last rehearsals, one Vilna Troupe actor (who asked to remain anonymous) told a Romanian reporter: "I wouldn't like you to write about me playing this part. To tell you the truth, I'm not so happy about it." When interviewed again less than a week later, the actor had experienced a change of heart. "I was wrong, I'll admit it, *mea culpa*," he confessed, "I couldn't possibly have imagined that the play would be so successful."⁴²⁵ Even the playwright himself was so taken aback when he learned of the production's success that he playfully exclaimed, "How marvelous! Who wrote it?"⁴²⁶

Singer of His Sorrow attracted diverse audiences (40% of whom were Jews and 60% of whom were non-Jewish Romanians, in Buloff's estimation) to over 300 performances in Bucharest alone, where it was hailed by Romanian and Yiddish critics alike as a groundbreaking masterpiece. "Buloff's performance is entirely new," wrote one Romanian critic, "He has broken the molds, he has created *another* art and heroically opened the window to unexpected

⁴²⁵ "Jubiloul de 25 reprezentatii al piesei *Cântărețul tristei sale*." Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Scrapbook 2, 134, Harvard Judaica Division. Translated by Ioana Costache.

⁴²⁶ Buloff, Kadison, and Genn, 53.

viewpoints.”⁴²⁷ Romanian critics likewise lauded the Vilna Troupe for importing new and cutting-edge theatrical ideas from the European avant-garde to the East.

Descriptions of the unexpectedly diverse crowds that came from across Romania to see a Yiddish theater performance were common. As one Romanian journalist described the opening moments of *Singer*:

The grey curtain is trembling, and in the dim light I can recognize the familiar faces that I usually see through the windows of Capșa, past and present state dignitaries, and countless artists, all drawn here by the magnet of pure Art that has overcome all petty prejudice. [...] The curtains part like waves and here comes Joseph Buloff, the musician who will keep us entranced for the whole evening; as the grandmother in the prologue he sings his sad song that runs throughout the story. Then the scenes follow: here comes the sublime embodiment of Yoshke: shy, gentle, dreamy eyes gazing at his beloved; every gesture is infinitely varied, with every look he pours out his feelings and his soul, and the feelings and the soul are those of a great artists who belongs to no race, people, or nationality, for he is the son of a creative muse, the son of mankind’s eternal genius. He speaks in Yiddish, true, but what do we care? He is love itself, sacrifice itself, pain itself throbbing, breaking, bending, groveling under our enchanted gaze.⁴²⁸

In describing Buloff’s Yoshke as a race-less and nationless “son of mankind,” a kind of universal hero that can be appreciate by Jews and Romanians alike, this journalist suggested that the secret of *Zinger*’s success was that the Vilna Troupe managed to tap into a universal theatrical vocabulary that was accessible to all. This was no mere *national* art, then, but a *supra-national* theater that spoke in the language of pure emotion. Buloff may have been speaking Yiddish, the reviewer acknowledged, but everyone in the audience knew that the words themselves were actually irrelevant in the face of such pure sentiments. Other Romanian reviewers echoed similar

⁴²⁷ Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Scrapbook 2, 138, Harvard Judaica Division. Trans. Ioana Costache.

⁴²⁸ Fulmen [Ecaterina I. Raicoviceanu], “Ioșke eu vioara.” *Dimineața*. Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Scrapbook 2, 141, Harvard Judaica Division. Trans. Ioana Costache. Casa Capșa, a famous Bucharest restaurant, hotel, and coffee shop that was frequently by the city’s political and intellectual elite.

assessments, calling the actors “half-gods, sublime beings endowed by nature not with one soul but with many souls.”⁴²⁹

Just as universalism and modernism had been the twin themes in critical appraisals of *The Dybbuk*, descriptions of the Vilna Troupe as the originators of a universal theater art were intertwined with declamations that *Singer* marked a major step forward for theatrical modernism at large. “The latest performance of the Vilna Troupe goes beyond the boundaries of theatrical convention and exceeds the ideals of the most demanding seekers of pure artistic reality,” wrote one Romanian critic.⁴³⁰ Romanian and European theatrical modernism seemed primitive in comparison.

The fiftieth performance of *Singer* was attended by dignitaries including the former Romanian minister Mihai Popovici, two princesses and a prince, and Corneliu Moldovanu, director general of the Romanian National Theater.⁴³¹ The Vilna Troupe’s production of *Singer* was so well received when it premiered in Bucharest that it played for a full year, culminating in a royal command performance before King Carol and his entourage. This was the first time in history that a Jewish theater group had been invited to perform before any monarch, and thus represented a significant benchmark for a theatrical tradition that had always struggled to prove its legitimacy. A second royal performance was subsequently requested, this time before the King of Greece. The Vilna Troupe actors, despite being accustomed by now to laudatory praise in the non-Jewish press, were astonished by the transformative impact that *Singer* seemed to have on the attitudes of the Bucharest elite towards Yiddish and Jewish culture. As Joseph Buloff

⁴²⁹ Anonymous review in *Gazeta Sporturilor*. Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Scrapbook 2, 174, Harvard Judaica Division. Trans. Ioana Costache.

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Scrapbook 2, 142, Harvard Judaica Division.

wrote, *Singer* was so successful because of *Romanian* enthusiasm about the show. As Buloff described the experience of performing *Singer* in Bucharest:

The secret of our success lies in the Romanians' attitude towards the show. From the most insignificant writer to the greatest poet or artist, they all feel it's their duty to speak publicly of their admiration for Jewish art and for the Yiddish language. One of the best Romanian actresses, Tanzi Cutava, said that a French version of the play would not sound nearly as beautiful as the Yiddish. When they get together for a glass of wine, Romanian writers diligently sing "*Yoshke mitn fidl, Berl mitn bas*," the leitmotif of Dimov's *Singer of His Sorrow*. [...] We're invited to work with Romanian theaters and to stage up Yiddish plays in Romanian translation. The climax was reached when a group of Romanian poets invited us to read from Yiddish literature at one of their literary meetings. It was the greatest satisfaction that the barren soil of Jewish Bucharest could produce. Seeing the hall filled with army officers, students, poets, priests (and the occasional curious Jewish face), I could feel myself trembling as I got onto the stage. But the silence and rapt attention that accompanied the reading were much more intense than I had ever seen at a Jewish literary gathering, and the applause and the 'bravos' were conspicuously loud. The book *Arabesques* (I had been reading [Alter] Kacyzne's "Eyeless") was snatched from my hand and passed from hand to hand by people who held it upside down and gazed in admiration at the square and 'mysterious' Jewish letters."⁴³²

Just as with *The Dybbuk*, the fervent response of non-Jewish spectators to *Singer* was the offstage drama that secured the production's onstage reputation. Spectators came to the theater with a dual purpose in mind: ostensibly, to see the Vilna Troupe perform *Singer*, but also to witness how other audience members responded to the production. The diversity of the audience for *Singer*, its size, and its enthusiasm, was every bit as much of a spectacle as what was happening onstage. Ironically, Bucharest's Jews only became interested in *Singer* after members of the Romanian elite began to attend. Had Romanian intellectuals not taken to *Singer* so strongly, the play would not have been nearly so successful with Romanian Jewish audiences.

Singer also inspired other theater artists to adopt a more aggressively modernist stance in their work, most notably Maurice Schwartz, who invited Buloff and several other cast members to join his Yiddish Art Theater company in New York based on *Singer*'s remarkable success, and

⁴³² Joseph Buloff, "A briv vegn der Vilner trupe in Rumenien," *Literarishe bleter* 59 (19 June 1925), 5.

a young Eugene Ionesco, who years later contacted Buloff, hailed the Yiddish actor as his idol, and credited *Singer of His Sorrow* with inspiring his own ideas for a new anti-naturalist style of drama, which later became famous as Theater of the Absurd.⁴³³

Singer of His Sorrow marked the culmination of the Vilna Troupe's introduction of modernism onto the Yiddish stage, in which realism was completely abandoned in favor of a dream-like world in which the theatrical imagination would have full reign. This ethos of modernist experimentation, in which the formerly sacred literary text was understood to be no more than a precedent to the creative possibilities of the stage, took hold among Yiddish theater artists throughout the world, inspiring mainstream companies like Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater to incorporate an increasingly modernist approach while also spurring the development of dozens of new experimental companies, many of which were founded by former Vilna Troupe members. At the same time, the broad appeal of these productions among Jews and non-Jews alike earned the Yiddish theater a new reputation as a vanguard of innovative aesthetics. The Vilna Troupe's productions of *The Dybbuk* and *Singer of His Sorrow* were the catalyst for this modernist embrace.

⁴³³ Buloff, "How the Yiddish Theatre Invented Theatre of the Absurd."

Chapter Four: The Transnational Vilna Troupe (1924 – 1929)

January 6, 1924: “The Wizards of Dramatic Art – the Original Vilna Troupe En Route to New York!” rang the headline in the *Forverts*. “They are an entirely different type of actor than we’ve ever seen before,” proclaimed another Yiddish journalist who detailed his dinner meeting with the actors, promising to share “every important detail” of “how they dress, how they appear, how they converse.”⁴³⁴ The Vilna Troupe actors were embraced as instant celebrities upon their 1924 arrival in New York, their every move tracked by a press determined to provide readers with a full account of the hotels they stayed in, the restaurants they ate at, the shows and banquets they attended, and the clothing they wore in the weeks leading up to the Troupe’s American premiere. In dozens of articles published in the New York Yiddish press, journalists marveled at the Troupe’s “refined” mannerisms, their youthful features, their intellectual personas, and their impressively comprehensive knowledge of Yiddish literature. With the sole exception of *Forverts* editor Ab. Cahan, none of the American Yiddish journalists covering the Vilna Troupe’s arrival had actually seen any of these actors perform, but this did not stop them from triumphantly hailing the *Vilner* as “high priests of art” who were sure to transform the American Yiddish stage.

An ocean and a continent away, the Warsaw public’s obsession with the Vilna Troupe continued to reign strong, in spite of the Troupe’s physical absence from their city. “Are you from Vilna? If so, you can make a living in Warsaw,” one Warsaw-based journalist wryly observed in a special foreign dispatch to the American Yiddish press. Instead of sending a few

⁴³⁴ B. Botvinik, “Epes gor anander sort idishe aktyorn zaynen zey.” *Forverts*, 11 January 1924, 3.

dollars back home to help your relatives in Poland, he continued, why not send us a Vilna Troupe actor instead? After all, for Polish Jewry a mere connection with the famous Vilna Troupe was more valuable than any currency:

For the best, the most up-to-date currency; the thing that is worth more than the very best stocks; that for which people are willing to pay the highest prices [...] – these are the “*Vilner*”, the Vilna actors of the *American Vilna Troupe*. Ach, *Vilner, Vilner, Vilner!* When somebody here sees a Vilna actor – he chases him down the street...for everyone wants to see a Vilna Troupe actor with his own eyes or, even better, to touch him.⁴³⁵

Tongue-in-cheek, the author suggests that the Polish government ought to have capitalized on the cult of celebrity surrounding the Troupe by giving actors away as lottery prizes. Instead of offering a million marks to encourage people to buy lottery tickets, why not make the grand prize the country’s most valuable export: a Vilna Troupe actor? But since the Americans have “purchased” this valuable commodity with the all-powerful dollar, he conceded, it is now up to the American public to guard this rare and valuable “18 carat treasure.”

A new kind of actor-intellectual to revolutionize the Yiddish stage. A brand name that signified the acceptance of Yiddish theater among modern theater artists around the world. A cosmopolitan commodity for an international community of highbrow theater devotees. A secular religion of sacred Theater Art, led by a visionary team of artistic High Priests who inspired worshipful devotion everywhere they traveled. A prestigious group of celebrities whose every gesture, outfit, word, and deed captivated fans in Warsaw, Berlin, Bucharest, Vienna, Amsterdam, Paris, London, New York, and beyond. A transnational cultural phenomenon of profound artistic significance – and economic value – for sophisticated audiences around the world. Thus was the Vilna Troupe received by the American public in the winter of 1924.

Between 1924 and 1929, in the aftermath of the sensational international success of its *Dybbuk* production, the Vilna Troupe’s reputation continued to expand around the world as the

⁴³⁵ Pinkhas Katz, “Ir zayt a Vilner?: oyb ye, vet ir hobn parnose in Varshe.” *Forverts*, 7 March 1924, 3.

company – in its many manifestations – became firmly established as a global brand. During this period, “The Vilna Troupe” referred to more than any one particular company, repertoire, or aesthetic; instead, it became a brand name signifying a particular set of ideas about the Yiddish theater: that it ought to be ‘serious,’ ‘literary,’ and ‘artistic’ in its intent; that Yiddish theater was an integral part of Jewish intellectual culture; that Yiddish theater ought to be artistically and aesthetically inventive; and finally, that Yiddish theater had something unique to offer the world. The Yiddish theater represented by the Vilna Troupe was a thoroughly cosmopolitan phenomenon at the forefront of the international avant-garde art scene. At the same time, within the Jewish community, the Vilna Troupe was understood to represent the final stage in the development of a fully-fledged modern Jewish culture that no longer lagged behind the cultures of other European nations. On the one hand, the Vilna Troupe’s emergence represented the culminating stage in the development of a *national* Jewish culture; on the other, the extraordinary global presence and success of these Yiddish theater artists promised a new era in which high-art theater would trump national, linguistic, and religious cultural specificity.

Cosmopolitan and yet also national; naturalist and modernist; local and global; strictly literary and highly theatrical; simultaneously embracing and rejecting traditional Jewish culture – the Vilna Troupe phenomenon negotiated between seemingly irreconcilable tensions that formed the ideological basis of the emerging Yiddish art theater movement. The growing cadre of Yiddish actors, directors, and designers who had, at one time or another, worked on a Vilna Troupe production likewise came to represent an extension of these ideas for their audiences. The international presence of actors, directors, designers, choreographers, technicians, and musicians who identified themselves and their work as belonging to the Vilna Troupe (by calling themselves “*Vilner*” and drawing attention to their personal association with one or more

branches of the company) exploded exponentially over the course of the 1920's. In 1916, 15 actors comprised the original Vilna Troupe; by 1920, at the time of *The Dybbuk*'s premiere, there were 38 actors and 2 directors affiliated with two distinct Vilna Troupes that performed across Eastern and Western Europe; by 1924, this number had expanded to approximately 50 actors performing on two continents; and by the early 1930's, nearly 150 actors could claim that they had once performed with "the" famous Vilna Troupe. An additional 18 directors, 10 set designers, and at least 4 prominent composers active in the Yiddish art theater movement also began their careers as "*Vilner*." Many of these artists went on to found high art Yiddish theater companies of their own. During the 1920's and 30's, current and former Vilna Troupe members could be found performing on five continents: from Buenos Aires to San Francisco; from Mexico City to Paris; from Vienna to Winnipeg; from Johannesburg to Melbourne.

What ultimately emerged during these years was a complex and ever-shifting global artistic network that positioned the Vilna Troupe at the center of an international high art theater scene. For the actors, the Vilna Troupe's reliance on constant travel as its *modus operandi* was an unfortunate necessity that rendered them perpetually homeless. Yet, as this chapter will demonstrate, it was the nearly constant traveling of the various Vilna Troupes during the 1920's that earned the company its reputation for modernist theatrical innovation. For a brief moment in history, then, a group of Yiddish theater companies – tremendously unstable, constantly traveling and shifting their personnel, yet all operating under the brand name and logo of "the Vilna Troupe" – came to be regarded as an important cultural institution, a kind of transnational center for innovative theatrical creativity, whose impact resonated not only for Yiddish-speaking Jews around the globe, but also for a remarkably broad transnational, multilingual, and cosmopolitan audience.

PART ONE: THE VILNA TROUPE PHENOMENON

As the Vilna Troupes and their actors grew increasingly dispersed during the mid- and late- 1920's, the core set of ideologies that united the *Vilner* became increasingly apparent. All of the Vilna Troupes were remarkably similar in the way that they defined their work – as simultaneously national and cosmopolitan – in their reliance on a common set of brand signifiers (i.e. the Vilna Troupe name, logo, and shared repertoire), and in their reluctant embrace of travel as both a means of survival and as their inspiration for theatrical innovation.

The Vilna Troupe and the Yiddish art theater movement it fostered drew equally from two cultural reference points: 1) the 18th and 19th century ideal of a National Theater; and 2) the high-art ideology of the 20th century art theater movement. As a self-proclaimed *national* Jewish theater whose greatest strength was in its *transnational* orientation and global reach, the Vilna Troupe was an unusual merger of these European models. The tension between these two competing paradigms was never fully resolved by any of the Vilna Troupes; instead, their work negotiated between both ideologies simultaneously. This merger of two distinct and seemingly opposed European models in the Vilna Troupe's ideological foundations gave the company a thoroughly original approach to “art theater” that help to propel its international reputation.

A National Jewish Theater

Like the 18th century German and French architects of national theater ideology, the Vilna Troupe sought to position its productions as a representation of the Jewish nation to itself. However, the *Vilner* were equally invested in proving the legitimacy of Jewish culture before an external and non-Jewish audience. In the absence of an official Jewish nation or state infrastructure, the Vilna Troupe actors became key representatives of the project to build a

diasporic-cum-national Jewish culture that operated across geographic borders.⁴³⁶ They performed in virtually every locale with a significant Jewish population around the world, building cultural bridges between diverse Jewish communities from Bucharest to Brussels to Baltimore, and everywhere in between. Zigzagging back and forth across national and continental borders with apparent ease, these performers took every opportunity to promote the idea that Yiddish theater was a (diasporic) national enterprise.

The true measure of the Jewish culture's achievements, argued the *Vilner*, was the sophistication of its theater. In doing so, they drew upon an older European model of the stage as the key representative of a nation's cultural health. This model can be traced back to Enlightenment-era Germany where, decades prior to the incorporation of Germany as a modern nation-state, a group of intellectuals led by G.E. Lessing and Friedrich Schiller promoted the idea of a national theater as an essential culture-building agent.⁴³⁷ As Schiller argued in "The Stage as a Moral Institution" (1784):

A standing theater would be a material advantage to a nation. It would have a great influence on the national temper and mind by helping the nation to agree in opinions and inclinations. The stage alone can do this, because it commands all human knowledge, exhausts all positions, illumines all hearts, unites all classes, and makes its way to the heart and understanding by the most popular channels. If one feature characterized all dramas; if the poets were allied in aim – that is, if they selected well and from national topics – there would be a national stage, and *we should become a nation*.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁶ On diaspora nationalism, see Simon Rabinovitch, "Diaspora, Nation, and Messiah" in *Jews & Diaspora Nationalism: Writings on Jewish Peoplehood in Europe and the United States*, ed. Rabinovitch (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012), xv-xli.

⁴³⁷ See Michael J. Sosulski, *Theater and Nation in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007) and Nadine Holdsworth, *Theatre & Nation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁴³⁸ Friedrich Schiller, "The Stage as a Moral Institution," in Daniel Gerould, ed., *Theatre/Theory/Theatre: The Major Critical Texts from Aristotle and Zeami to Soyinka and Havel* (New York: Applause, 2000), 253.

While the members of the Vilna Troupe never invoked Schiller by name, it was this same notion of the theater as the quintessential national enterprise that fueled their understanding of the company's import.

Anecdotes about the national significance of the Yiddish theater (and about the Vilna Troupe's activities in particular) appeared with striking frequency in articles and reviews penned by Vilna Troupe affiliates. When actor Avrom Morevsky chanced upon a Latvian geography textbook while performing in Riga in 1926, he found a section deriding Jews for not having a proper modern culture. The evidence, argued the textbook's author, was that the local Jews had no real theater. Recalling the incident in an article for a Vilna Yiddish daily, Morevsky called upon the Latvian Jewish community to prove this textbook author wrong: "'Bravo!' I shouted, 'Bravo, bravo! The author of this book is correct. But this winter he will need to issue a new edition – for Latvian Jews will show him a theater...'"⁴³⁹

In articles, interviews, and public statements, actors and critics alike invoked the Vilna Troupe as a symbol for Jewish culture as a national enterprise. As one Vilna Yiddish theater critic wrote of the Troupe's visit in 1922:

Their repertoire is drawn from the highest peaks of literary creativity. And just as the Vilna Troupe's color, characteristics, sound, and words are drawn from the wellsprings of our national creativity, the Troupe itself becomes an element of folk art; that is to say, that the theater of the Vilner is *a part of our national art*. [...] Today, when we will see the Vilner on our Vilna stage for the last time, we must proclaim: we wish the theater that they have built all the best, not only as from one relative to another or as one Vilna resident to another, but as an ancient center of Jewish culture to the new flower in the flourishing garden of our national spirit.⁴⁴⁰

Critics framed the Vilna Troupe's theatrical activities as symbolizing the revivification of a national Jewish culture that had its origins in antiquity. Moreover, the positive reception of the

⁴³⁹ Avrom Morevsky, "Kunst un shund," *Vilner tog*, 28 December 1928, 4.

⁴⁴⁰ Falk Heylperin, "Nit nor vi kroyvim: tsum gezegnen mit der Vilner trupe." March 28, 1922. Esther Rokhl Kaminska Theater Collection (RG 8), Box 60, Folder 24, YIVO.

Troupe's productions among non-Jewish spectators seemed to indicate that the Jews had finally caught up with the cultural achievements of other European nations. As one Yiddish journalist described the first performance of Mazo's Vilna Troupe in Antwerp:

You walk into a Yiddish theater. And yet one has the impression, one hundred percent, that you are sitting in a real *theater* – in a European theater that is Jewish, in a Jewish theater that is European. Here you are sitting in a theater where your face does not burn from shame but only from excitement. This is a Yiddish theater where we can open the doors wide and invite in cultured people, Jewish or non-Jewish. For we have nothing for which to be ashamed. We can be proud of this.⁴⁴¹

As a national-cultural institution recognized around the world for its artistic greatness, the Vilna Troupe represented a point of entry via which Jews could at last take full part in modern European culture. By suggesting that Jewish culture was every bit as rich and vibrant as the national cultures of other Europeans, the Troupe's performances symbolized the legitimacy of the Jewish nation. The Vilna Troupe thus did not simply perform modern Yiddish dramas; its productions were also public performances of Jewish nationhood.

National Cosmopolitans

The *Vilner* may have subscribed to 18th century ideas about the theater as a nation-building institution, but their company was also a thoroughly cosmopolitan and post-national enterprise. Despite the stark ideological opposition between these two European models of theater's relationship to national culture, the Vilna Troupe managed to fuse both approaches together by developing a *national* theater that operated on a *transnational* model. Like the Enlightenment-era architects of the German national stage, the Vilna Troupe envisioned itself as a key agent in the formation of a Jewish national consciousness. At the same time, however, the

⁴⁴¹ Kh. Ts., "Der derfolg fun der 'Vilner trupe'." *Yidishe prese* (Antwerp), 1933. Nachum Melnick and Devorah Rosenblum Papers (RG 1147), Box 5, Folder 36), YIVO.

Vilner also believed that the very best theater art could be appreciated by anyone with an intellectual sensibility and good taste, regardless of his or her nation, class, or language.

This desire for a global art that could transcend any one individual culture was in keeping with the European art theater movement of the period. European high art companies like the Théâtre Libre in Paris, the Freie Bühne in Berlin, and the Independent Theater in London viewed national affiliation as more or less irrelevant in the pursuit of great art. Instead of focusing on questions of nationalism, these companies spoke in terms of forging an international religion of art that transcended language, national affiliation, ethnicity, religion, and geography.

Like their European art theater counterparts, the *Vilner* and their critics consciously cultivated the idea that the Vilna Troupe heralded a new era of internationalism for modern Jewish culture. When Azro and Alomis' branch of the company made its first cross-continental leap in 1924, the Yiddish press proclaimed:

Soon there will be such a strong link between the Yiddish theaters of America and Europe that companies will travel from Warsaw to New York, just as today actors set out on a tour from New York to Boston or from Chicago to Detroit. The very notion of great distance is vanishing, and soon there will come a time when, if a Yiddish theater company from American is on their way to Europe and realizes that somebody forgot to bring along Dovid Moyshel's beard, they will simply send the stage manager on an airplane from the middle of the ocean, and he will meet the company in Europe with the beard.⁴⁴²

The global trajectory of the Vilna Troupe was widely understood to mark the dawn of a new cosmopolitan era for the Yiddish theater, in which geographical distance would no longer constrain the movements of actors or their productions. As a constantly traveling theater company with an international audience base, the Vilna Troupe offered a unique prototype for spectators and critics – both Jewish and non-Jewish – to imagine what kinds of global theater might be possible in an age of air travel and technological innovation.

⁴⁴² “Di Vilner in Nyuyork un di Nyuyorker in London.” *Forverts*, 22 February 1924, 3.

When asked to describe what made the Vilna Troupe so memorable, actor Joseph Buloff replied, “The Vilna Troupe in its conflicting complexity reflects the Jewish community in its entirety.”⁴⁴³ In forging together seemingly opposed tenets of nationalist and post-national theater into a hybrid model, the Vilna Troupe’s ideology mirrored the predicament of twentieth-century Eastern European Jewry. Torn between nation-building and cosmopolitan impulses, the Jews of Eastern Europe created a thriving modern Yiddish culture predicated upon this very tension; a culture of in-betweenness. As Yiddish writer Y.L. Peretz instructed his disciples in 1910:

Ghetto means impotence. Interchange of cultures is the only hope for human growth. Man, the complete man, will be the synthesis of all the varied forms of national culture and experience.

But also:

Leave the ghetto, see the world – yes, but with Jewish eyes. He [the Yiddish writer] should consider his problem from a point of view that’s Jewish. The ethical light in which he sees it must be Jewish. To have Jewish art, you need Jewish artists. [...] To find the heart, the essence of Jewishness in all places and times, in all parts of this scattered, dispersed yet universal people; to find the soul and see it illuminated with the prophetic dream of the future – this is the task of the Jewish artist.”⁴⁴⁴

A theater company like the Vilna Troupe, simultaneously invested in its function as a nation-building institution *and* its ability to transcend national constraints, could only have emerged within the idiosyncratic context of modern Jewish culture. It was in this unique amalgamation of two seemingly opposed ideologies that the Vilna Troupe found its artistic voice. While the Vilna Troupe introduced significant innovations to the Yiddish theater, these innovations were, by and large, not particularly unique on the global stage. The “innovations” of the Vilna Troupe were, more often than not, borrowed and adapted from other theater artists around the world: the ensemble-based style of the Moscow Art Theater, the Romanticism of Wyspiański, the repertory

⁴⁴³ From David Lifson’s 1960 interview with Buloff. Lifson, 642.

⁴⁴⁴ I.L. Peretz, “What Our Literature Needs,” trans. Nathan Halper, in *Voices from the Yiddish: Essays, Memoirs, Diaries*, eds. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 25-31.

theater system and directing style of Max Reinhardt, the modernist theatricality of the avant-garde Polish stage, and the constructivism of Meyerhold, among others. What was unique about the Vilna Troupe was its national-cum-transnational approach to making theater art. It was this merging together of the national voice of a diasporic people with repertoire, acting techniques, directing styles, and design innovations culled from theater artists around the globe that propelled the Vilna Troupe to the forefront of the international modernist theater scene.

Going Global: The Transnational Vilna Troupe

Who or what made up the famous Vilna Troupe? Identifying the Vilna Troupe or verifying the identity of someone who claimed to be a member was no simple matter by the mid-1920's, and loyal fans, casual spectators, and professional theater critics found themselves equally befuddled by the elusive company that seemed to be everywhere all at once. In a single 1924 newspaper, a Yiddish reader in Warsaw might have come across:

- A telegram announcing that the Vilna Troupe has finished its tour in Yugoslavia, is now performing in Czechoslovakia, and will soon arrive in Vienna.
- A letter to the editor about a current Vilna Troupe production in Lviv.
- An advertisement for the Vilna Troupe's upcoming season in Warsaw.
- A review of the Vilna Troupe's tour-in-progress of Belgium and Holland.
- A review of the Vilna Troupe's recent performances in New York.
- An announcement that the Vilna Troupe is currently performing in Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore.⁴⁴⁵

For the casual reader, this apparent omnipresence of the Vilna Troupe was confusing, but for avid Yiddish theater fans and critics, the company was a puzzler. If at any given moment "the

⁴⁴⁵ Mikhl Weichert, "Di shefe fun Vilner trupes," *Literarische bleter*, 25 July 1930, 560.

Vilna Troupe” referred to hundreds of Yiddish theater artists in dozens of locales, what exactly *was* this company? And how could anyone be certain that those purporting to associate themselves with the Vilna Troupe were in fact legitimate *Vilner*?

While critics often commented on the confusion surrounding the “real” Vilna Troupe’s identity, at times taking sides in favor of one branch or another, this uncertainty did not tarnish the company’s reputation in the slightest. On the contrary, the aura of mystery surrounding the Vilna Troupe’s identity only seemed to enhance its global reputation.

By the late 1920’s, six Vilna Troupes were performing around the world. The following is a partial list of the places where these companies performed between 1923 and 1930:

1. Mordechai Mazo’s Vilna Troupe: Warsaw, Lodz, Krakow, Czernowitz, Radom, Lublin, Bialystok, Baranovitch, Bucharest, Jassy, Lviv, Kishinev, Vilna, Riga, Belgade, Prague, Vienna
2. Alexander Azro and Sonia Alomis’ Vilna Troupe: Berlin, Paris, London, Brussels, Amsterdam, the Hague, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, Los Angeles, Cleveland, Detroit, San Francisco
3. Splinter group from Mazo’s Vilna Troupe: New York
4. Second splinter group from Mazo’s Vilna Troupe: Warsaw, Lodz, Krakow, Bucharest
5. Belgian Vilna Troupe: Antwerp
6. Bronx Vilna Troupe: New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, Los Angeles, Cleveland, Detroit, Toronto, Montreal, Winnipeg

With the sole exception of the Belgian Vilna Troupe, all of these companies were on the road more often than not. Each production was designed, by default, to be portable.

In spite of a plethora of Vilna Troupes and Vilna Troupe actors operating independently and simultaneously in multiple locations, what is noteworthy is how similar all of the branches remained to one another. Each continued to define itself by the same ideology that the founders of the original Vilna Troupe had articulated back in 1915; each branch likewise followed the lead of the others in style and aesthetic. The repertoire also remained remarkably consistent across various Vilna Troupe branches and the other Yiddish art theater companies that they inspired.

Striking too is the extent to which the Vilna Troupe retained its status as “art theater” even after becoming commercially successful. While most European art theaters struggled to retain their high art status after becoming popular, the Vilna Troupe held on its reputation for artistic integrity even after the international triumph of *The Dybbuk*. The Vilna Troupe largely retained its image as the inheritor of the Yiddish art theater mantle even as dozens of new Yiddish art theater companies entered the scene as competitors.

Even more strikingly, this high art status seemed to apply equally to each of the splinter branches of the Vilna Troupe rather than adhering solely to any one of them. Each Vilna Troupe, then, was just as ‘legitimate’ and ‘authentic’ as any of the others. The same multiplicity of companies, transnational presence, unified repertoire, and shared group of actors, directors, and designers that confounded spectators and critics was in fact the Vilna Troupe’s greatest achievement, enabling any theater artist who could call himself a *Vilner* to have the same strong audience base and high art reputation no matter where they traveled.

The Vilna Troupe Brand

In positioning the Vilna Troupe as “transnational,” I locate the company as a kind of distinct global brand. Each of the Vilna Troupes employed a nexus of practices that – intentionally or not – conveyed a fixed identity to spectators and critics. In doing so, the Vilna Troupes and their present and former actors developed a brand that was instantly recognizable around the world. Individual actors and directors themselves were by and large not a part of this identity; rather, the Vilna Troupe brand was primarily associated with the literary repertoire shared between companies, along with a more abstract notion of what the Troupe represented for its audiences: a decidedly high art Jewish theater and an instrument of national-cultural cohesion for Yiddish speakers around the globe. “Vilna,” as one journalist wrote on the fifteenth

anniversary of the original company's founding, "is no mere name but, rather, an idea."⁴⁴⁶ The mere act of calling oneself a *Vilner* became a marker of an individual's artistic credentials, connecting actors and directors – regardless of their theatrical experience or talent – to an established history of high art theatrical innovation. As the architects of the legitimate Yiddish theater, any Vilna Troupe production was, by definition, art and could not be classified as *shund*.

Just as a consumer approaches a brand-name commodity with particular associations, for spectators and critics the "Vilna Troupe" title came with a set of expectations for how the companies would perform *and* how they ought to be received by audiences. These expectations, in turn, impacted the spectator's experience of the performance event, coloring every Vilna Troupe production with the aura of the original company's reception. A company operating under the Vilna Troupe name could attract a large audience almost anywhere. When people heard that the Vilna Troupe was coming to town, wrote one journalist, the reaction was always the same:

Who? The *Vilner*? Ah, yes. We know them already...and we will attend! Nobody asks: who is performing? What are they performing? What difference does it make who or what? These are the *Vilner*! It's a sure thing, a brand.⁴⁴⁷

Or, in the words of another critic:

He who buys a ticket for a Vilna Troupe performance wants to see something different, something that he would never see done by another theater group. It is thus unimportant if 'the others' are actually better or not, just as the consumer of a particular type of tea or chocolate wants precisely that one kind and not another.⁴⁴⁸

A Vilna Troupe production was virtually guaranteed to make headlines anywhere, regardless of the play's merits or the specific individuals involved. By the mid-1920's, spectators and critics

⁴⁴⁶ Yitskhok Katznelson, "Der koyekh fun di Vilner," in *15 yor 'Vilner trupe'*, ed. S. Gelbart, 15-16.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁴⁸ Weichert, "Di shefe fun Vilner trupes," 560.

entered each Vilna Troupe production primed by years of accolades from the international press. Long before the curtain rose on a new Vilna Troupe production, before the company had even arrived in a new city, spectators had already made up their minds that the Vilna Troupe's performance would be extraordinary.

PART TWO:

1924

1924 was a watershed year for the Vilna Troupe and marked the beginning of its cross-continental presence. In 1920, the Vilna Troupe had consisted of two distinct companies and a few dozen actors across Europe. By the end of the decade, the Vilna Troupe name was associated with hundreds of actors operating independently across five continents. The events that occurred during 1924 were largely responsible for this transformation, permanently expanding the Vilna Troupe's geographical reach and establishing its identity as a thoroughly global enterprise.

1924 was also a turning point in Yiddish theater practice more broadly. The Azro/Alomis Vilna Troupe's leap from the theaters of Western Europe to New York's Second Avenue marked the first time that an *entire* Yiddish company (complete with its own discrete stylistic and ideological approach to theater-making) had ever crossed the Atlantic. Their Vilna Troupe's first visit to the United States inspired other European and American Yiddish theater companies to embark on cross-continental tours of their own. The Vilna Troupe's trajectory in 1924 thus represents the precise moment when the company – and with it, the modern Yiddish theater at large – became a thoroughly transnational phenomenon.

Perspectives Across the Ocean

Before Azro and Alomis' Vilna Troupe made their first trek across the Atlantic, journalists and spectators migrating between Europe and the Americas brought word of the Troupe's accomplishments to their new homes. The resounding success of *The Dybbuk* across Europe was widely reported in American Yiddish newspapers by a network of traveling U.S.-based journalists and foreign correspondents. American Jews first learned of the Vilna Troupe by reading about its performances in the local Yiddish paper. By the time the Vilna Troupe actually arrived in America in 1924, the actors were welcomed by a pre-established fan base. Just as advance praise of the Vilna Troupe had preceded the company's arrival in Western Europe in the early 1920's, so too was the Vilna Troupe brand disseminated cross-continentially long before the actors crossed the Atlantic. In this case, however, it was several years between when American Jews first encountered the Vilna Troupe in the Yiddish press and when they first saw the company perform. These years of anticipation functioned as an extended incubation period for the Troupe's American reputation, producing a heightened mythology of an infallible Vilna Troupe whose productions were unlike anything else in the Yiddish theater.

The first major American Yiddish journalist to report on the Vilna Troupe was Abraham Cahan, the founding editor of New York's daily Yiddish newspaper *Der forverts* and a figure whose outsized influence on the American Yiddish cultural scene was akin to Y.L. Peretz's role in turn-of-the-century Jewish Warsaw. Cahan often traveled to Europe's major Jewish centers to report on foreign events of interest to the American Jewish community, and it was on his first post- World War I trip to Eastern Europe in 1919 that Cahan attended a Vilna Troupe production: Peretz Hirschbein's *Dem shmids tekhter* [*The Blacksmith's Daughters*], performed by Mazo's branch in Warsaw. Impressed by the "seriousness and artistic collaboration" of the

company members, Cahan wrote an enthusiastic review for the *Forverts*.⁴⁴⁹ Two years later, Cahan made a special trip to Berlin just to see the Vilna Troupe perform. When Azro and Alomis' Vilna Troupe visited London a second time in 1923 just prior to embarking for New York, Cahan once again crossed the Atlantic to review their performances. Of the company's production of Hirschbein's *The Abandoned Inn*, the famously critical Cahan confessed that although he had never liked the play before, the Vilna Troupe's performance completely reversed his opinion. Of the actors, he uncharacteristically gushed:

His [Azro's] tone for the dialogue was exactly as people speak in real life and was absolutely correct – a characteristic that we have rarely seen in America, neither on the Yiddish stage nor on the English stage. [...] Her [Alomis'] acting was filled with moments that were overflowing with natural talent, just as fresh water flows from a spring that nature herself has created. These moments [...] could not have been the result of conscious thought, they could not have come from the mind. These moments were born in the soul, in a divine soul.⁴⁵⁰

The overwhelmingly positive tone of Cahan's Vilna Troupe reviews stood in sharp contrast to his reputation as a curmudgeon when it came to writing about the theater. The *Forverts* editor was notorious for his uncompromising opinions on what constituted good and bad theatrical taste, and his reviews of new plays and productions were known to make or break the reputations of his subjects. But Cahan's reviews of the Vilna Troupe demonstrated a softer side of the well-known arbiter of American Jewish culture. Cahan had panned Peretz Hirschbein's *Carcass* when the play was first published, but watching the Vilna Troupe's production of it in London, the *Forverts* editor ruefully admitted that perhaps he had been wrong about the drama's literary merit after all. "I used to think," he wrote, "that *Carcass* was one of Hirschbein's weakest plays, but after seeing [Sonia] Alomis perform it, I changed my mind [...] and recognized in the drama

⁴⁴⁹ See Cahan's description of his 1919 encounter with the Troupe in Ab. Cahan, "Di shoyshpiller fun der barimter Vilner trupe," *Forverts*, 16 November 1923, 3.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

a zest that I had not felt before.”⁴⁵¹ Coming from the notoriously critical Cahan, the *Forverts*’ praise was particularly effective at heightening spectators’ expectations about the Vilna Troupe. Cahan’s surprisingly enthusiastic reviews in the Yiddish press primed Jewish-American theatergoers to expect that the Vilna Troupe would be better than any other Yiddish theater company that they had ever seen.

Cahan was not alone in reviewing Vilna Troupe productions for the American Yiddish press. *The Dybbuk*’s tours across Eastern and Western Europe were widely reported by foreign correspondents for the American Yiddish press. Under Cahan’s leadership, the *Forverts* was particularly committed to tracking the Vilna Troupe’s every move, and notices about the Troupe’s activities appeared on the paper’s theater page on a weekly basis throughout the early 1920’s. Thus for years prior to the Troupe’s 1924 arrival in New York, American Yiddish journalists were just as confused about the company’s seeming omnipresence as their European counterparts. As Pinkhes Katz, a Warsaw-based foreign correspondent for the *Forverts*, told American readers in 1922:

I have recently discovered that a single person can be in two cities at one and the same time...and indeed, he can do the same thing, let’s say, in New York at exactly the same moment that he is doing it in Toronto.

What, do you think that’s impossible?

And if it is impossible – how then can it be that this discovery is indeed true, a fact, that the actors of the Vilna Troupe have demonstrated in black and white?⁴⁵²

The average Warsaw resident, Katz continued, could open up four or five newspapers each morning and find conflicting reports of the Vilna Troupe’s presence in dozens of cities at once. Adding to the confusion, reviews of the Troupe’s performances tended to be remarkably similar.

Early one beautiful morning you wake up and read in the paper:

⁴⁵¹ Cahan, “Di shoyshtpiler,” 3.

⁴⁵² Pinkhes Katz, “Di barimte Vilner teater trupe – oder beyde kuni-lemels.” *Forverts*, 30 December 1922, 3.

“THE VILNA TROUPE IN BERLIN: For the past week, the Vilna Troupe has performed to enormous acclaim in Berlin. They presented *The Dybbuk* for their first performance, and on the second night they performed *The Abandoned Inn*. The third night – *The Family*, and they are currently preparing *Day and Night* and *Amnon and Tamar*. Their performances were attended by the most eminent German artists and critics of Berlin." But then you pick up a second paper and read:

“THE VILNA TROUPE IN VIENNA: The Vilna Troupe, which has been performing here for a week, has had extraordinary success. Besides *The Dybbuk*, *The Abandoned Inn*, *The Family*, and *Day and Night*, they are preparing a production of *Amnon and Tamar*. Their performances were attended by the most prominent Christian critics and artists of Vienna.” [...]

Another paper: THE VILNA TROUPE IN PARIS

And yet another: THE VILNA PLAYERS IN HOLLAND

You leap up as if scalded. What the heck is this?? At the same time as they are performing in Amsterdam, they are a hit in Paris, and on the very same day that they are a sensation in France – their performance delights the Dutch press?⁴⁵³

Katz’s comic portrayal of the average Warsaw Jew’s confusion about the plethora of Vilna Troupes, along with other foreign correspondent essays printed in the *Forverts* and the New York Yiddish press on the subject, provided American and European Jews with a shared understanding of the Vilna Troupe’s growing reputation, iconic repertoire, and geographical multiplicity. Articles on the Vilna Troupe commissioned by American papers were often reprinted in the European Yiddish press, and vice versa. These articles enabled American Yiddish theatergoers to participate, albeit remotely, in the Vilna Troupe’s rise to fame. By the time the Vilna Troupe embarked on its first U.S. tour, the company had already been present, in a metaphorical sense, on the American Yiddish theater scene for years.

The *Vilner* Become Americans

For the average New Yorker, January 11th 1924 was an uneventful day. Opening up the paper in the morning, he would have found few surprises in the national headlines: a crackdown on police corruption in Philadelphia, an article on child labor in the tenements, some minor

⁴⁵³ Katz, “Di barimte Vilner teater trupe,” 3.

political setbacks for President Calvin Coolidge at the start of an election year, and an announcement that the President of the New York Stock Exchange was about to retire. The international headlines were hardly more memorable: the Prince of Wales had visited Paris, a British battleship sank after an accidental collision on a foggy day, and an Austrian count who bore a strong resemblance to Rudolph Valentino was embroiled in a quarrel with his new in-laws.⁴⁵⁴

But for New York's nearly two million Jews, the front page news in the *Forverts* on January 11th was cause for celebration: "Yesterday morning, 7 o'clock in the morning at Pier 59 on 18th Street, the ship *Magestic* arrived and brought us the famous Vilna Troupe."⁴⁵⁵ After years of anticipation, American theatergoers would at last catch their first glimpse of the most famous Yiddish theater company of them all.

In many ways, the Vilna Troupe's American reception echoed its treatment by European critics. The company's every move – its departure from London, the long transatlantic journey, the actors' first outings in New York and soirees with journalists and prominent intellectuals – made front page headlines in the Yiddish press in the weeks leading up to the premiere. On the day of the Vilna Troupe's arrival, the *Forverts* printed two articles on the subject, one of which included lengthy personal interviews with every single member of the company. Reporters trailed the actors around the city and detailed their outfits, mannerisms, and dining habits for an eager readership. All 11 Yiddish theaters in New York City shut down for the Vilna Troupe's opening night so their actors could attend. Just as in Europe, the excitement over the Vilna Troupe's arrival was not limited to Jewish theatergoers alone. The company's first productions

⁴⁵⁴ Summary of front page headlines in *The New York Times*, January 11, 1924, 1.

⁴⁵⁵ "Vilner aktyorn dertseyln vi azoy zeyer barimte trupe iz organizirt gevorn," *Forverts*, 11 January 1924, 1.

on U.S. soil were favorably reviewed by major American papers including *The Evening Post*, *The Morning Telegraph*, *The New York Telegram Evening Mail* and *The New York Times*.

Yet, in sharp contrast to European theatergoers, the American public's romance with the Vilna Troupe was short-lived and came to an abrupt halt after just a few performances. As one journalist quipped, New York was the Vilna Troupe's Waterloo.⁴⁵⁶ Indeed, though New York would eventually play host to three different Vilna Troupes during the 1920's, none was ever able to achieve the kind of broad-based popular success that had come so easily in Europe.

The American context posed three new challenges to the Vilna Troupe brand that proved extremely difficult for the actors to surmount. First, the Troupe's 1924 arrival in New York was met with stiff competition on the American Yiddish stage, with major big-budget productions featuring local celebrities Aaron Lebedoff, Misha and Lucy German, and Molly Picon premiering alongside the Vilna Troupe's offerings. Second, American Yiddish theatergoers were more accustomed to companies that blurred the lines between high art and *shund*, and were thus less receptive than European audiences to a group ideologically dedicated to the strict separation of highbrow theater and popular entertainment. Finally, the Vilna Troupe's American reception was hindered by its own remarkable success in Europe. Years of advance press had elevated audience expectations to unrealistic levels, and the company simply could not live up to the hype. Spectators entered each performance expecting to emerge intellectually and spiritually transformed; instead, they encountered a group of all-too-human actors with only a few years of experience on the professional stage. Not only did these actors seem significantly younger and less mature than American spectators had anticipated, but their repertoire – groundbreaking in Europe – was already familiar to American audiences from the New York Yiddish art theaters.

⁴⁵⁶ Dr. Y. Kritikus, "Di 'Vilner' vern Amerikaner." *Der Amerikaner*, 16 April 1926, 10.

The Vilna Troupe's first American tour was thus subverted by the company's very achievements in inspiring other theater artists around the world to emulate its repertoire and style.

Still, in spite of the company's failure to become a Second Avenue sensation, the Vilna Troupe's American reception offers a perfect demonstration of the staying power of the brand. The anticipation that greeted the Vilna Troupe's arrival was unprecedented in the history of the Yiddish stage, and shows how the Troupe's reputation echoed across continents long before any of the branches left Europe. Even more remarkably, each subsequent Vilna Troupe arrival in the United States was met with the same rush of enthusiasm that greeted Azro and Alomis' company in 1924. The Vilna Troupe brand was so firmly established as "high art" by 1924 that the American failure did not compromise the company's global reputation in the slightest.

The Courtship

When Azro and Alomis' branch of the Vilna Troupe had returned to London in 1923, they were met by representatives from the three most prominent Yiddish theaters in New York: the National Theater, the Second Avenue Theater, and Boris Thomashefsky's Broadway Yiddish Theater. After years of speculating about the Vilna Troupe from afar, the leaders of these theaters had each independently come to the conclusion that they could capitalize on the Troupe's international success with an American tour. Managers from all three theaters tried to woo the actors with fancy meals and promises of rich dividends for an American tour sponsored by their company. The dispute over who would have the honor of bringing the famous Vilna Troupe to New York was, of course, well publicized in the American Jewish press and only added to the company's legendary aura among American theatergoers. The quarrel was only resolved when the powerful Hebrew Actors' Union stepped in and endorsed Thomashefsky's

bid, citing his forty years of service to the American Yiddish stage. In fact, Thomashefsky's company was on the brink of bankruptcy, and the Union's support was a last ditch effort to keep the aging actor's historic theater company alive.⁴⁵⁷

Thomashefsky's role as impresario for the Vilna Troupe's American premiere was rather ironic, given his reputation as a leading actor on the melodramatic Yiddish stage.⁴⁵⁸

Thomashefsky was most famous for playing over-the-top princes and romantic heroes in the *shund* theater, and of all the Yiddish actor-managers in New York, his name was perhaps the least likely to be associated with high art ideals. As an actor, Thomashefsky was known for his theatrical personality, preening mannerisms, and the women who swooned over his beautiful stocking-clad legs in the aisles; as a theater manager, he gravitated towards melodramatic fare like Moyshe Zeifert's *Dos pintele yid* [*The Essential Spark of Jewishness*], a musical comedy with a catchy hit number about the survival of the Jewish spirit against all odds. By the early 1920's, however, Thomashefsky's theater was facing dire financial straits as American Yiddish theatergoers flocked to see the newer companies (invariably headed by younger managers) who billed their productions as "high art": Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater, Jacob Ben-Ami's Jewish Art Theater, the Folksbiene, and the Irving Place Theater, among others. At the same time, a fresh crop of younger stars (including the inimitable Molly Picon) and savvier directors in the popular Yiddish theaters further siphoned off Thomashefsky's audience. As the Vilna Troupe's star was rising across Europe, Thomashefsky's was fading fast in New York's rapidly changing Yiddish theater scene. In order to survive, the aging actor realized, he would have to

⁴⁵⁷ See A. Frumkin, "Di Vilner in Nyu York," *Di idishe velt*, 22 January 1924, 4.

⁴⁵⁸ Thomashefsky was also known as one of the founding fathers of Yiddish theater in America. See Sandrow, 72-76 and Aaron B. Seidman, "The First Performance of Yidish Theatre in America," *Jewish Social Studies* 10.1 (January 1948), 67-70.

find a way to get American Jews excited about his theater company again. The Vilna Troupe was his ticket to a fresh start.

The members of Azro and Alomis' Vilna Troupe, for their part, seemed remarkably uninformed about their new manager's *shundist* reputation.⁴⁵⁹ When the Vilna Troupe actors first arrived in New York, they began their tour of the city's legendary Yiddish theaters by attending a production of Avrom Shomer's comedy *Der griner milioner* [*The Green Millionaire*] at Thomashefsky's Broadway Yiddish Theater, starring their patron in the title role.⁴⁶⁰ The play was the latest in a series of light entertainments about the comic blunders of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in New York, and was as far from "pure" theater art as anything that the Vilna Troupe actors could have imagined; yet with dozens of journalists watching their every move, the *Vilner* clapped politely and told reporters that they were very impressed by Thomashefsky's skill as an actor.⁴⁶¹ The lesson for the Vilna Troupe was clear: art and *shund* in America were not separate domains but rather bedfellows, intimately and inextricably intertwined. As a self-avowed "art theater," the Vilna Troupe would have to learn to contend with the American public's fondness for melodrama suffused in high art rhetoric. Late at night in their hotel rooms after the performance, did the actors question their wisdom in accepting Thomashefsky's invitation? Face to face with the American Yiddish theater's seemingly insatiable appetite for *shund*, might they have wondered how their own work would be received?

⁴⁵⁹ Indeed, American Yiddish journalists were initially surprised to hear of Thomashefsky's involvement with the Vilna Troupe. Articles speculating about the first meeting between the famous melodramatist and the artistically uncompromising Azro appeared frequently in the weeks leading up to the Troupe's first performance. See B. Bronz, "Di Vilner trupe in Nyu York," *Forverts*, 12 January 1924, 8, in which the author imagines the members of the Vilna Troupe being baffled by a production of Thomashefsky's *Dos pinteke yid*.

⁴⁶⁰ "Vilner teater politik in Amerika," *Forverts*, 18 January 1924, 3.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*

But for all of his faults, Thomashefsky remained a competent theater manager who knew exactly how to market a production to the American public.⁴⁶² Upon returning from London, he immediately convened a press conference to announce the Vilna Troupe's plans for an American tour. The press conference spurred Yiddish journalists to write dozens of articles about the company in the weeks leading up to its arrival, thus generating free publicity about the Vilna Troupe. The Vilna Troupe, crowed the *Forverts*, had "earned Jewish drama and Jewish acting a place in the world."⁴⁶³ The notoriously elitist theater critic A. Mukdoyni wrote glowing profiles of various Vilna Troupe actors.⁴⁶⁴ Readers were frequently reminded about the accolades accrued by the company in the European press. Yiddish newspapers printed tongue-in-cheek articles from their London correspondents complaining that New Yorkers had "kidnapped" the Vilna Troupe and left Londoners bereft. London, wrote one journalist, seemed "gray and workaday" without the Vilna Troupe's "holy" and "transformative" presence.⁴⁶⁵

Thomashefsky also began to run advertisements for the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* for several weeks before the premiere, in which he announced the imminent arrival of "the world famous *original* Vilna Troupe for only 5 weeks in New York!"⁴⁶⁶ Thomashefsky was, of course, well aware that there was no such thing as "the original" Vilna Troupe, and that there were multiple companies that operated independently across Europe. In fact, Thomashefsky had

⁴⁶² This was not the first time that Thomashefsky had imported talent from abroad. He had years of practice assisting dozens of other European Yiddish actors, beginning with his own brothers, in transitioning to the American Yiddish stage. See Bronz, 8.

⁴⁶³ "'Di makhsheyfim fun der dramatischer kunst' – di originele Vilner trupe afn vegn keyn Nyu York," *Forverts*, 6 January 1924, 9.

⁴⁶⁴ See A. Mukdoyni, "Alte bakantn tsvishn di Vilner: tsum onkumen fun der Vilner trupe," *Morgn Zhurnal*, 11 January 1924, 7.

⁴⁶⁵ Y.L. Fayn, "Londoner idn hobn faribl afn 'Forverts' farvos er hot gekidnept di Vilner trupe," *Forverts*, 6 January 1924, 5.

⁴⁶⁶ See advertisement for the Vilna Troupe in *Frayhayt*, 29 January 1924, 3.

initially approached Mazo's Vilna Troupe with his invitation for an American tour. It was only after Mazo declined the offer (reportedly telling the famous actor: "What do we need America for?") that Thomashefsky turned his attention to Azro and Alomis' branch.⁴⁶⁷ But as a skilled theater manager, Thomashefsky consciously designed the advertisements to remove any doubts that theatergoers might have about this Vilna Troupe's authenticity. Adding to the hype, theatergoers were strongly encouraged to hurry to the box office with the suggestion that tickets would soon sell out.⁴⁶⁸

Thomashefsky also published his own version of the story of the managers' quarrel in the *Forverts*, in which he compared his victory in securing the Vilna Troupe's tour to Morris Gest's achievement in bringing the celebrated Moscow Art Theater to American shores in 1923.⁴⁶⁹ Thomashefsky's remarks demonstrate how the Moscow Art Theater's hugely successful New York debut just one year earlier inspired American Yiddish theater managers to court the Vilna Troupe. In fact, the rush of articles anticipating the Vilna Troupe's arrival frequently appeared alongside reviews and advertisements for the Moscow Art Theater's second American tour.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁷ "We were stubborn people," recalled actor Luba Kadison of the encounter between Mazo and Thomashefsky. "Mazo said, 'What do we need America for? We're doing well here, we are together, we perform, we travel, we have our own wagon. Why should we leave all this for America?'" Luba Kadison, int. with Leah Shlanger, 1987.

⁴⁶⁸ "Tickets to the first performance of the Vilner are already available at the Box Office. Hurry up and buy them now!" Advertisement for *The Dybbuk*, *Forverts*, 2 January 1924, 2.

⁴⁶⁹ Boris Thomashefsky, "Thomashevski dertseylt vos es hot zikh ongeton in teater velt mit der Vilner trupe," *Forverts*, 12 December 1923, 3. Incidentally, Morris Gest was also a Yiddish-speaking Jew from Vilna.

⁴⁷⁰ The Moscow Art Theater first arrived in New York on January 3, 1923, and toured Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston through the spring. After a five-month tour of Western Europe, the celebrated Russian company returned to New York on November 19, 1923 and performed in the U.S. until May. The Moscow Art Theater came back to New York one last time in the winter of 1925-1926 before returning to the Soviet Union in May. On the Moscow Art Theater's American reception, see Lolo Bob Johnston, "The Moscow Art Theater in America," (Ph.D. Diss., Northwestern University, 1952. On Gest's career as an impresario for Russian theater artists in America, see Valleri J. Hohman, *Russian Culture and Theatrical Performance in America, 1891-1933* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 75-100. The Yiddish press enthusiastically covered the Moscow Art Theater's American tours. Just as Yiddish journalists referred to the Vilna Troupe as "*di Vilner*" [i.e. "those people from Vilna"], so too did they refer to the Russian actors by the familiar title "*di Moskver*" ["those people from Moscow"]. See, for example, "In di Nyu Yorker Englisher teater: di 'Moskver' zaynen vider do!" *Forverts*, 16 November 1923, 3.

The Vilna Troupe's arrival in the United States directly coincided with the Moscow Art Theater's second set of performances in New York. Indeed, the Vilna Troupe's travels had long corresponded to the trajectory of Stanislavsky's famous company. When the Moscow Art Theater first departed the Soviet Union in the fall of 1922, Azro and Alomis' Vilna Troupe had just left Eastern Europe, its region of origin, for the first time; when the Moscow Art Theater came to Berlin, this branch of the Vilna Troupe had just left and was on tour in the German countryside; when the Moscow Art Theater came to Paris, the Vilna Troupe met them there a few weeks later. Where the Yiddish art theater actors went, the Russians soon followed, and vice versa. The two companies thus shared what was essentially the same geographical pathway to international stardom.

The members of the Vilna Troupe, as long-time devotees of Stanislavsky and his company, were well aware that their travel plans ran parallel to those of their idols; whereas the Vilna Troupe's nearby presence probably did not always register for the Russian actors. Still, the strong correlation between the travel plans of the Vilna Troupe and the Moscow Art Theater reflects a shared understanding of the geography of the international art theater movement. The Moscow Art Theater's success in Berlin drew upon an established interest among German theatergoers in Eastern European theater practice – the very same cultural context that had enabled the Vilna Troupe to captivate German audiences a few months earlier. Similarly, the Vilna Troupe's positive reception in Paris was enhanced by the “art theater” vogue spurred by Stanislavsky's company's recent presence in the French capital. Azro and Alomis' decision to travel to New York was thus once again perfectly in line with the trajectory of the global art theater movement, whose epicenter had shifted from Russia to Western Europe, and finally, to New York. Just as high art theatergoers around the world followed the famous Russian

company's American success, so too did Jewish spectators in Eastern and Western Europe turn their attention en masse to the Vilna Troupe's premiere in New York.

Celebrities in New York

The members of Azro and Alomis' Vilna Troupe disembarked from the *Majestic* on January 10th, 1924 to find hundreds of fans and reporters eagerly awaiting them at the dock.⁴⁷¹ The crowds were not deterred by the early morning hour; many had spent the entire night at the pier to assure their place in the throng. Azro greeted the crowd with an impromptu speech that was reprinted for hundreds of thousands of readers in the newspapers the next day. As the front-page article in the *Forverts* reported:

“We are arriving in a new world,” announced Alexander Azro, speaking for the entire company. “We feel as though we are starting all over again. We have performed in Russia and in Poland, in France, and in England. We have been highly praised and a hit everywhere we’ve gone. Even your editor, Ab. Cahan, who has long been known to us as a great critic, saw us perform and has been very fond of us in his reviews. But now, we come to a new world. [...] We will perform under different circumstances, in a city where there are 11 Yiddish theaters and many, many Yiddish actors.” [...] “I know,” stated the pale and charming actor, “that in America you have to sell yourself. I am, however, not yet an American, and I do not know how to do this, and thus I will not promote myself. Myself and my colleagues, we do not want to do this. It is not important what I say. What is important is how we perform.”⁴⁷²

Sonia Alomis chimed in, echoing her husband's remarks: “We have come to conquer America.

We have hearts that are full of love for theater art. We bring with us many years of experience,

⁴⁷¹ Due to visa and passport difficulties, only 13 of the 17 members in this Vilna Troupe branch arrived in New York on January 10th. The remaining four members spent several weeks waiting for their documents in Paris before setting sail. Travel delays forced the company to push back opening night by 10 days, from January 18th to January 28th. See “Vilner aktyorn dertseyln,” “Vilner teater politik,” and “Arum di idishe teater: naves un notitsn,” *Forverts*, January 25, 1924, 3.

⁴⁷² “Vilner aktyorn dertseyln.”

and an ideal that is holy to us. [...] But whether we will prevail or ourselves be conquered, that is something that America must judge for itself.”⁴⁷³ The crowd applauded and cheered.

The Vilna Troupe sought to position itself as an organization whose “holy” dedication to high art trumped all commercial considerations. The implication was clear: this complete attention to artistic integrity was what distinguished the Troupe from its imitators. Of course, Azro and Alomis’ insistence that they would not engage in American-style marketing stood in sharp contrast to Thomashefsky’s publicity maneuvers, the subsequent flood of preemptively laudatory articles, and the actors’ own dealings with the American Yiddish press. Azro’s disembarkment speech was itself decidedly self-promotional. He listed the Vilna Troupe’s accomplishments in great detail, taking special care to mention Cahan’s approval, even as he vowed that the actors would never “sell themselves” to the American public. Azro’s insistence on this point, which he repeated in dozens of interviews leading up to the premiere, was in fact a brilliant marketing strategy that drew upon theatergoers’ frustrations with decades of vicious competition and partisan politics among the Yiddish theaters of New York. As one American Yiddish journalist, asked to summarize the history of the Vilna Troupe in a single sentence, proclaimed: “Everyone seeks bread, but a group of idealistic young people seeks art.”⁴⁷⁴

Over the next two weeks, as the actors toured New York and rehearsed sporadically, journalists wrote a flood of articles describing the mysterious foreign celebrities.⁴⁷⁵ On the day of

⁴⁷³ “Vilner aktyorn dertseyln.”

⁴⁷⁴ B. Botvinik, “Di Vilner trupe iz geboyrn in a tsayt fun shrek, hunger, un fartsveyflung,” *Forverts*, 24 January 1924, 4.

⁴⁷⁵ The Vilna Troupe actors who came to America at Thomashefsky’s invitation in January of 1924 were: Alexander Azro, Sonia Alomis, Bela Belarina, Yankev Blayfer, Joseph Greenberg (who later became the famous American Yiddish film director Joseph Green), Miriam Veyde, Frida Vitalin, Paula Valter, Leyzer Zshelazo, Sholyme Tanin, Yankev Lutbotzki, Leye Naomi, Noah Nakhbush, Moyshe Feder, Matisyahu Kovalski, and Chaim Shniur. A few months later, Shniur and Belarina left the Troupe and Leib and Khane Kadison and Reuven Vendorf came from Mazo’s company to Azro and Alomis’.

their arrival, a lucky *Forverts* reporter lurking in the lobby of the Claridge Hotel was invited to join the actors for dinner, and he gleefully described their eating habits and dinner conversation for his readers in the next morning's paper (incidentally, this article appeared alongside a review of the Moscow Art Theater's production of *The Brothers Karamazov*).⁴⁷⁶ The members of the Vilna Troupe were "a completely different type of actor than we have ever seen before," he claimed.⁴⁷⁷ In sharp contrast to the flashy attire of the celebrity-obsessed American Yiddish actors, the Vilna Troupe's dress and demeanor appeared simple and elegant. Indeed, the actors themselves looked so young that the journalist initially thought they were a group of local university students instead of the world-famous actors he had come to interview. At dinner, they conversed like educated intellectuals. Other Yiddish journalists detailed the actors' educational credentials: university attendance, advanced theatrical schooling, and in the case of one actress, professional training as a dentist.⁴⁷⁸ Taken together, these characteristics – the youthful appearance of the actors, their idealistic student-like demeanor and dress, and their degrees – surprised and delighted American Jewish theatergoers.

As the actors prepared for their American premiere, even the most competitive Jewish actors and directors in New York hesitated to compete with the Vilna Troupe. Maurice Schwartz, the founder and artistic director of New York's Yiddish Art Theater, held the sole rights to perform *The Dybbuk* in America and could have withheld his permission, thus preventing the Vilna Troupe from performing the most famous play in its repertoire. Instead, he granted the

⁴⁷⁶ The Claridge Hotel, at Broadway and 44th Street, was also notorious for having hosted the officials of the Tsarist Romanov government two decades earlier. The irony of a group of Yiddish actors, most of whom were revolutionaries, sitting down to eat at the same tables where Tsarist officials had once dined did not escape Yiddish journalists.

⁴⁷⁷ Botvinik, "Epes gor anander," 3.

⁴⁷⁸ Prior to joining the Vilna Troupe, actress Frida Vitalin had briefly attended dental school in Kiev. See "Vilner aktyorn dertseyln" and Zylbercweig, 5:3781-3783.

visiting actors the right to perform the play without charge.⁴⁷⁹ Schwartz was known as a fiercely competitive director who was ruthless in his treatment of anyone who threatened his company, and as the reigning high art Yiddish theater organization in America, it was his livelihood that was most directly endangered by the Vilna Troupe's arrival. But primed by years of foreign press attesting to the Vilna Troupe's uniqueness, Schwartz treated the guest artists with the utmost respect. The notoriously egocentric Schwartz even joined with the city's ten other professional Yiddish theater companies in sending his actors to the premiere so that they could observe the Vilna Troupe. Like Cahan's shift from famously harsh theater critic to loyal Vilna Troupe supporter, American Yiddish theaters took journalistic proclamations that the *Vilner* were "a completely different type of actor" at face value and treated the visiting actors differently than they had ever treated their competitors. For Schwartz and the other directors of the American Yiddish theaters, the arrival of the Vilna Troupe was a significant cultural event that required an exception to standard business practice.

Effusive articles about the company continued to be printed on a daily basis in the Yiddish press, in spite of the fact that the Troupe had not yet begun to perform. "The politics of the American Yiddish theater today are all about the Vilna Troupe," wrote one journalist. "Everything centers around them."⁴⁸⁰ Intellectuals speculated about the impact the Troupe's productions would have on the American Yiddish stage. Articles hypothesizing the Vilna Troupe's influence on American Jewish theater culture appeared not only in New York but also in the Yiddish newspapers of other major Jewish centers. Writing for the Ohio edition of *Di idishe velt* (which circulated in Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Columbus), Abraham Frumkin wondered if the Vilna Troupe's success would be the downfall of the American Yiddish art

⁴⁷⁹ "Vilner teater politik," 3.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

theater. Could there possibly be enough high art theater spectators to support another Yiddish art theater in New York? Or would the rush of publicity surrounding the Vilna Troupe's American tour persuade new audiences to improve their theatrical taste? The Vilna Troupe's premiere might prove to be a catastrophe for other art theater companies in the city, Frumkin told his readers, but there was no reason to worry about the famous visiting artists themselves. With its extraordinary record of achievements abroad, years of advance promotion by the American Yiddish press, and established status as a household name, the Vilna Troupe's success in New York seemed virtually guaranteed. It was the *other* Yiddish companies that readers ought to worry about.⁴⁸¹

Waterloo

On January 29th, 1924, the crowd that gathered in the lobby of Thomashefsky's Broadway Yiddish Theater included nearly every major Yiddish journalist, actor, and writer in New York. This was the first time in its history that the entire American Yiddish theater community put aside its differences and gathered together for a performance. Old Jacob P. Adler and his wife Sarah sat in the front row next to Thomashefsky and the great German-Jewish actor and director Rudolph Schildkraut, Maurice Schwartz sat alongside Jacob Ben-Ami, and, as the *Forverts* reported, even the assimilated children of old Yiddish acting families who had crossed over to the English-language stage turned out for the Vilna Troupe premiere.⁴⁸² Younger Yiddish actors present included major stars like Molly Picon, Ludwig Satz, Leon Blank, Samuel Goldenberg, and Muni Vayzenfreund (who later became famous in American theater and film as

⁴⁸¹ Frumkin, 4.

⁴⁸² Led Pensil, "Vos es hot zikh opgeton in teater bay der ershter forshtelung fun di Vilner." *Forverts*, 1 February 1924, 3.

Paul Muni). Reuven Guskin, head of the Yiddish Actor's Union, was there, as was Joseph Rumshinsky, Second Avenue's most important composer of Yiddish theater music. The audience at the premiere represented a veritable cross-section of American Yiddish theater history, from its founding fathers to its most popular contemporary artists.

Prominent Yiddish writers and intellectuals sat alongside the actors and directors. Peretz Hirschbein was there, as were fellow playwrights Dovid Pinski, Osip Dimov, and Leon Kobrin, and dozens of major Yiddish prose writers and poets, including Avrom Reyzen, Zishe Landau, and Mani Leyb. Yiddish critics at the premiere included Alexander Mukdoyni, Hillel Rogoff, the theater historian B. Gorin, and of course, *Forverts* editor Abraham Cahan.⁴⁸³ It seemed to the actors that the entirety of the American Yiddish literary community was present on opening night. Word of the Vilna Troupe's American premiere had also spread beyond Yiddish-speaking circles. David Belasco ("the Reinhardt of the American stage!" Azro told the others) had accepted their invitation and sat in the audience on opening night, along with Stanislavsky and the touring actors of the Moscow Art Theater.⁴⁸⁴ Every major figure in the American Yiddish theater, the most prominent Yiddish writers and critics in New York, plus David Belasco and the artists of the Moscow Art Theater – no other event in American theater history had ever brought together such a diverse and celebrated group of theater artists to witness a single production.⁴⁸⁵

As the first act ended, a tense atmosphere prevailed as the famous actors, directors, and journalists in the audience gathered in the lobby and the smoking room. Nobody wanted to be the first to share their thoughts, lest they might say the wrong thing. For a group that included some

⁴⁸³ Azro, "Der onheyb," 33.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid. and Led Pensil, 3.

⁴⁸⁵ The opening night performance of *The Dybbuk* on January 29, 1924 was not open to the public and was an invitation-only event.

of the most opinionated members of the American Jewish community, the crowd was strangely silent. As one reporter described the scene:

Everybody wanted to hear everyone else's opinion first and withhold their own thoughts until later. The writers did not want to speak because they did not want to show their cards. They needed to hide the secret "news" until the next day, for their newspapers. The actors did not want to give their opinions because they too did not want to show their cards before a crowd full of journalists. [...]

And so the lobby simmered like a covered pot. Each person wanted to hide his own opinions while finding out everyone else's. The conversations circled around and around the real topic, and everyone tried to figure out what everybody else thought, but as soon as somebody did say something, everyone else pounced with a counterargument.⁴⁸⁶

The oddly reserved atmosphere that dominated the lobby, the reluctance of literary and cultural leaders to articulate their opinions, the tense and defensive reaction against those who tried to respond to the production – the audience had encountered something unexpected in this first Vilna Troupe production on American soil: disappointment. The production was not what this esteemed audience had imagined of the Vilna Troupe. The American Jewish public, inundated for years with glowing reviews from abroad, had elevated the Vilna Troupe to a legend, which became all the more unassailable because so few Americans had actually seen its actors perform. Entering the theater on opening night, the crowd expected exactly what it had been promised: actors whose skills were beyond those of any other performers in history, an exceptionally high production value that heralded a new era of theater-making, and a spiritually transformative communal experience akin to a religious rite. Instead, they encountered flesh-and-blood actors whose technique left much to be desired, especially in comparison with the many talented performers on the American Yiddish stage. The set design was thoughtful but not revolutionary, the pacing seemed too slow, and the actors uneven in their skill. It was a *good* production, but nothing *extraordinary*.

⁴⁸⁶ Led Pensil, 3.

In short, the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* was not all that different from the high quality Yiddish theater that dominated Second Avenue. By 1924, New York was indisputably the center of the global Yiddish theater scene, and as such, the city was home to the highest concentration of talented Jewish theater artists in the world. Moreover, the 1923-24 season included several productions that featured major Yiddish theater stars. In the same month that the Vilna Troupe held their American premiere, Ludwig Satz and Celia Adler (the "First Lady of Yiddish Theater" and the older half-sister of Stella Adler) played opposite one another in Kamanovitch's *Der meshugener* [*The Crazy Man*], Aaron Lebedoff and Leon Blank co-starred at the National Theater in *Dem tatns zundl* [*Father's Little Son*], and Misha and Lucy German presented several well-attended melodramas at the Orchestra Hall. In addition, two other productions that premiered around the time of the Vilna Troupe's arrival would later be described by theater historians as major landmarks in the history of the American Yiddish stage. The first, *Yankele*, was Molly Picon's debut performance on Second Avenue, which catapulted the young actress to instant fame as the darling of the American Yiddish theater. The second was Maurice Schwartz's production of Goldfaden's *Di tsvey kuni lemls* [*The Two Kuni-Lemls*] at the Yiddish Art Theater, an innovative modernist adaptation of a Yiddish classic that inspired other directors to mine the nineteenth century repertoire for new material.⁴⁸⁷ By any measure, Second Avenue's Yiddish theaters were thriving in 1924, causing the Vilna Troupe's audience to question whether the visiting performers had anything to add at all.

Not only did the Vilna Troupe face stiff competition from New York's Yiddish theaters, but it also had to contend with the presence of the most famous "art theater" of them all. The

⁴⁸⁷ Schwartz's Yiddish art theater had many hits during this season, including a production of Asch's *Shabbsai Tsvi*, which was playing while the Vilna Troupe actors prepared for their opening. On Schwartz's *Kuni-Lemls* and his other productions of Goldfaden operettas in the mid-1920's, see Joel Berkowitz, "The *Tallis* or the Cross?: Reviving Goldfaden at the Yiddish Art Theatre," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 50 (Spring 1999): 120-138.

celebrated Moscow Art Theater opened its highly acclaimed production of *Uncle Vanya* at the Jolson Theater just one night before the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* premiere.⁴⁸⁸ The two companies continued to perform simultaneously throughout the entirety of the Vilna Troupe's stay in New York. Americans with an interest in foreign-language art theater were more likely to attend the Moscow Art Theater's productions, which received more coverage in the English-language press, than the Vilna Troupe. The Vilna Troupe also had to contend with the rise of the Little Theater movement, which inspired dozens of theater companies across America to describe their work as intimate and non-commercial. American theatergoers who might once have been intrigued by the Vilna Troupe were already familiar with companies like the Provincetown Players, the Theatre Guild, and other leading "art theater" ensembles of the day. No Vilna Troupe had ever faced more formidable competition: a thriving American art theater scene in Yiddish and English; audiences composed of some of the most talented and successful Yiddish actors and directors in the world; and the co-presence of the ultimate arbiters of "art theater" status, the Moscow Art Theater.

While the Vilna Troupe's productions were attended by some English-language journalists, it was the Moscow Art Theater that the American press flocked to see, just fifteen blocks uptown of Thomashefsky's theater. Indeed, the language that American reviewers used to describe the Russian actors was remarkably similar to the accolades the Vilna Troupe had received in Berlin, Brussels, Paris, and London. The Moscow Art Theater "awakened in theatergoers a consciousness of what dramatic art really means," wrote *Theatre Magazine*.⁴⁸⁹ Others wrote of forgetting that they did not understand Russian when the Moscow Art Theater

⁴⁸⁸ See coverage in the *Forverts*: "Di moskver fangen on tsu shpiln a naye tshekhov pyese." *Forverts*, 25 January 1924, 3.

⁴⁸⁹ *Theatre Magazine*, February 1926. Quoted in Johnston, 218.

performed.⁴⁹⁰ In contrast, the few articles written about the Vilna Troupe's American tour in the English-language press, while certainly positive, were not nearly as effusive as what the *Vilner* were accustomed to. Instead of hailing the company's groundbreaking contributions to modern theater, American critics described the Vilna Troupe's productions as intriguing and exotic. The *New York Times* called *The Dybbuk* an "odd Yiddish drama" and "one of the strangest Yiddish novelties offered in New York City in a long time," and accorded more attention to the outpouring of enthusiasm for this company among the American Yiddish public than to the performance itself.⁴⁹¹ The *New York Telegram and Evening Mail* described it as "an arresting performance" of a "strange occult drama."⁴⁹² The Vilna Troupe's subsequent presentations of two Hirschbein dramas, *Carcass* and *Green Fields*, received a similarly tepid response from the American press. The best reviews compared the Vilna Troupe favorably to the Moscow Art Theater, the worst commented on the foreignness of the actors' language, repertoire, and style. Overshadowed by the famous Russian players up the street, the Vilna Troupe's performances attracted little attention from the English-speaking American public.

Yiddish journalists were also conflicted about the quality of the Vilna Troupe's productions. Completely positive reviews were few and far between, and writers reflected on the contrast between their expectations of the Vilna Troupe and what they actually saw onstage. "I must tell you the truth," confided critic Avrom Koralnik, "I went to the Vilner premiere, to the *Dybbuk* production, with a predetermined verdict. First, because of the play itself, but second –

⁴⁹⁰ Johnston, 174. Ironically, the members of the Moscow Art Theater were quite surprised that the language barrier posed so few problems, as they were very concerned about language difficulties when planning the tour.

⁴⁹¹ "Vilna Troupe Give Odd Yiddish Drama: Throng Greets Their First Appearance Here in 'The Dibbuk' at Thomashefsky's Theatre," *The New York Times*, 29 January 1924, 17.

⁴⁹² Robert Gilbert Welsh, "Spirit Control in Yiddish Play: *The Dibuk* by the Vilna Troupe is Strange Occult Drama." *The New York Telegram and Evening Mail*, 15 February 1924, 17. Welsh did, however, comment that the set and lighting design for *The Dybbuk* were especially innovative and unlike anything else the American stage had ever seen before.

because the Vilna Troupe was too strongly heralded. They had become something of a legend.”⁴⁹³ Koralnik was surprised to find himself disappointed with elements of the production. The actors seemed nervous, their lines at times uttered too quickly to be understood (“not legendary enough!” charged Koralnik). The pacing of the staging was inconsistent, while the famous dance of death was too heavily stylized and seemed rather pretentious. Similarly, theater critic Vladimir Grosman described a disappointing *Dybbuk* production that was too abstract for American audiences to appreciate. The tempo was too slow, and the actors seemed extremely nervous about how they would be judged. Still, Grosman concluded, the Vilna Troupe’s premiere was “a major event – not because everything was successful, but because their stature was so deeply artistic.”⁴⁹⁴ Some damned with faint praise, others simply ignored the question of production value entirely. One journalist writing for *Der tog* described the Troupe’s production of *Green Fields* as being “staged, as it was certain to be, in a new and interesting manner.”⁴⁹⁵ A curt description of the plot followed, with no other mention of the company’s stylistic choices. With years of experience reading effusive reviews of the Vilna Troupe’s performances abroad, *Der tog*’s readers were well aware that this sort of cursory review was not at all in keeping with the company’s European reception.

Other Yiddish journalists were less forgiving of the Vilna Troupe’s faults. B.Y. Goldshteyn, also writing for *Der tog*, attended *The Dybbuk* multiple times and was extremely disappointed with the unevenness of the two casts (the Vilna Troupe frequently double cast its

⁴⁹³ Dr. A. Koralnik, “Der Vilner ‘Dibek’,” *Der tog*, 30 January 1924, 5.

⁴⁹⁴ Vladimir Grosman, “Der dibek bay di Vilner: etlekhe bamerkungen vegn der ershter forshtelung.” *Forverts*, 1 February 1924, 3.

⁴⁹⁵ *Der tog*, 22 February 1924, 3.

productions, in an effort to highlight the company's famed "ensemble approach").⁴⁹⁶ The journalist Morris (Moyshe) Meyer, who wrote under the pen name "Dr. Kritikus," was, as his pseudonym promised, especially harsh. In Europe, Meyer acknowledged, the Vilna Troupe had been groundbreaking pioneers of a new mode of Yiddish theater. In America, however, the overhyped Vilna Troupe had found its "Waterloo."

They did not come to America as cultural ambassadors, as pioneers of a better Yiddish theater in Galicia and in Poland, but they instead arrived with pomp, with big announcements, as artists, and it is therefore that they had their "Waterloo" in America. When the Vilna Troupe first arrived we immediately said that many of the actors were not bad. But overall, in comparison with our Schwartzes, our Weisenfreunds, our Satzes, this was a bit too strong [of an assessment]. They are simply a company with a good approach to theater.⁴⁹⁷

If only the *Vilner* had come to America without trying to become "*stars* after the American fashion," lamented Meyer, American theatergoers might have been more receptive to their work. Indeed, in the first few weeks of performances, journalists treated the company sympathetically. As guest artists who were specially invited by Thomashefsky and the Yiddish Actor's Union, reviewers felt that they owed the company a certain measure of respect. But a few weeks later, when the actors decided to stay permanently in the United States, the contrast between their productions and the current offerings of the American Yiddish stage came into stark focus. In direct competition with Maurice Schwartz, Jacob Ben-Ami, and a new generation of American Yiddish theater stars, the Vilna Troupe's style no longer seemed quite so pioneering nor their staging quite so innovative as what had long been promised by the press. Moreover, while American Yiddish directors continued to recruit new playwrights and experiment with innovative adaptations of literary classics, the repertoire of this branch of the Vilna Troupe had become static. Rather than preparing new material, Azro and Alomis decided to present the same

⁴⁹⁶ B. Y. Goldshteyn, "Bay di Vilner un in kunst-teater." *Der tog*, 22 February 1924, 3.

⁴⁹⁷ Kritikus, 10.

plays in America that had earned them accolades in Europe: Ansky's *Dybbuk*, Hirschbein's *Carcass* and *Green Fields*, Kobrin's *The Village Lad*, Asch's *The Countryman*, and Pinski's *Yankl the Blacksmith* – the core group of “literary dramas” associated with the Vilna Troupe's rise. The Troupe had first staged many of these plays almost a decade earlier. Stylistic choices that were once cutting edge now seemed dated and inferior to the more daring directorial work happening on Second Avenue and on Broadway. The Vilna Troupe was once a great theater company, concluded Meyer, but it could no longer compare to the towering achievements of the American Yiddish stage.

Even Cahan, whose praise for the Vilna Troupe was largely responsible for the company's presence in New York, found himself scrambling to reconcile his prior appraisals of the company with its tepid American debut. He reminded readers of the serious flaws of Ansky's play, and suggested that the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* production was hobbled by the company's hesitancy to further adapt this grossly overwritten play of “very little literary merit.” “If only the Vilna Troupe were not afraid to shorten Ansky's captivating play, this would have been one of the most remarkable and wonderful productions in the history of Yiddish theater in America,” he lamented in the *Forverts*.⁴⁹⁸ The Vilna Troupe's symbolist staging brought out the best in this flawed play. Cahan was pleased with the heightened, spiritual, and poetic atmosphere that the production seemed to engender among spectators. The performance was “overflowing with the wine of poetry” that “brought you outside of your ‘self.’”⁴⁹⁹ For Cahan, the Vilna Troupe's overall approach to the play as a modernist masterpiece was gratifying; less impressive, however, were the specific staging and technical details of the production. The pacing seemed

⁴⁹⁸ Ab. Cahan, “Di ershte Amerikaner forshtelung fun der Vilner trupe: ir ‘simbol-shpil’ fun Anskis ‘Dibek.’” *Forverts*, 30 January 1924, 4.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

off, the acting unremarkable and at times old-fashioned. Perhaps the actors of the Vilna Troupe could learn about acting technique from their American Yiddish counterparts, Cahan conceded. Still, the Vilna Troupe still had something unique to contribute to the American Yiddish theater: an authentic and pure artistic vision, free from the constraints of technical perfection.

In terms of technique, the Vilna Troupe has a substantial amount to learn from our American Yiddish stage; and this goes even for Alomis. But what meaning does technique have when it comes to internal artistic temperament, and the deep effect that art has? [...]

America is a land of technique. Technique is important. But when one puts too much emphasis on technique in art, it becomes just as destructive as it is useful. Let us not confuse technique with the real meaning of theater art. Too many theater people make that mistake. A professional cook has more technique than a housewife, but a housewife's dinner has more flavor.⁵⁰⁰

The Vilna Troupe's technical shortcomings may have been a disappointment, argued Cahan, but this did not at all negate the impact of the company's work. True theater art required an inherent artistic approach and temperament that was far more difficult to acquire than technique and training, and this quality was precisely what the Vilna Troupe had to offer the American public. This, Cahan told readers, was perfectly in line with the European-American divide in the non-Jewish theaters, in which American companies tended to have better technique and production value while European troupes were more likely to outdo their American counterparts in matters of "artistic principle." The Vilna Troupe, as a child of the European high art theater movement, likewise made up for what it lacked in technical sophistication with artistic merit. "They have a lot to learn from us," Cahan concluded, "But we also have much to learn from them."⁵⁰¹ In spite of its overall failure to inspire enthusiasm among American theatergoers, the Vilna Troupe remained, for Cahan and many others, a necessary and long-awaited agent of transnational exchange between Europe and America. The American Yiddish theater may have had a

⁵⁰⁰ Cahan, "Di ershte Amerikaner forshtelung," 4.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

monopoly on acting technique and perhaps even talent, but it took the Vilna Troupe's arrival to bring a fully-fledged high art sensibility to the New York Yiddish stage. The future development of the Yiddish theater, Cahan implied, would require a fusion of European and American approaches to the stage: i.e., a merging of rigorous training, skill, and technique with an idealistic and soulful approach to art-making. "We may have good actors," lamented one journalist in the *Forverts*, "but the Vilna Troupe produces *good theater*."⁵⁰² If the Vilna Troupe's arrival in the United States showed New York audiences just how far the American Yiddish theater had come in comparison with European Yiddish companies, it also offered a poignant demonstration of what American theatergoers were still missing.

Cosmopolitan Pioneers

In America, Azro and Alomis' Vilna Troupe did not even come close to achieving the level of critical or popular success that its actors had grown accustomed to in Western Europe. Interest in the company diminished after the *Dybbuk* premiere, and the Troupe's other performances, while still relatively well attended, received little attention in the press.⁵⁰³ cursory notices and brief reviews that mixed praise and criticism appeared occasional, but the long-winded articles, special sections, photograph series, actor interviews, and effusive praise that had filled the pages of the American Yiddish press prior to the Vilna Troupe's arrival were nowhere to be found.

⁵⁰² B. Botvinik, "Far vos ken men nit makhn in Amerika aza theater vi di Vilner trupe?" *Forverts*, 9 March 1924, 5.

⁵⁰³ A few journalists, most notably Hillel Rogof, continued to vigorously attend and review Vilna Troupe productions, but they were in the minority. For Rogof, the Vilna Troupe could do no wrong. Of *Green Fields*, he wrote: "In this play, the Vilna guests demonstrated even more strongly than in all of their previous productions that they fully earned the enthusiasm that they inspired from the best critics in Europe." See Hillel Rogof, "Di Vilner trupe in Perets Hirshbayn's *Grine felder*," *Forverts*, 27 February 1924, 4 and Rogof, "Di Vilner trupe in a realistisher drama: *Di neveyle fun Perets Hirshbayn*," *Forverts*, 6 February 1924, 4. In general, however, post-*Dybbuk* reviews of the Vilna Troupe in the American Yiddish press were far more tepid.

By the spring of 1924, ticket sales were down. No longer the darling of the American Yiddish stage (they had ceded this role to rising stars like Molly Picon), the same Vilna Troupe that in January had sold out its tickets weeks in advance struggled in April to make enough money to pay its actors. This was a tremendous disappointment for the actors, who had hoped to settle down and make a home for themselves in New York alongside the American Yiddish actors who could count on finding steady work in the city season after season. As Alexander Azro declared in one of the many personal interviews conducted before the *Dybbuk* premiere:

We are searching for a home, a place of rest. Our work cannot progress because we are wandering. We remain artistically uncongealed, for all of our energy goes towards finding cities and countries where we can perform. [...] When we carry walking sticks in our hands, we cannot devote ourselves as we wish to our artistic development. Perhaps America will become our home, and we will once and for all do away with the bread problem.⁵⁰⁴

Just as Americans had imagined the Vilna Troupe to be the prophetic saviors of the American Yiddish theater, Azro and the actors envisioned America as a land where they could finally stop their incessant travels and begin new lives. While it was customary for American Yiddish actors to go on tour during the summer months, most were able to reside permanently in New York for the rest of the year. Thomashefsky and the other Yiddish theater managers had promised the actors stability and wealth in America; instead, the company found itself teetering on the edge of bankruptcy only three months after its celebrated opening. Resourceful as always, Azro and Alomis returned to their standard operating strategy and declared that the Vilna Troupe would embark on another “triumphant” tour – this time, across the United States. Performances were scheduled for Baltimore, Wilmington, Philadelphia, Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, where the Troupe would remain for six months.

⁵⁰⁴ Alef Alef, 6.

In New York, the Vilna Troupe's reputation for theatrical innovation had been comprised by its lack of a skilled stage director. Dovid Herman, who had toured with Azro and Alomis' branch of the company in Western Europe, had vehemently rejected all of the recruitment offers he received from American Yiddish theater producers, including Thomashefsky's. Herman felt that he would not be able to maintain his high artistic standards in a country where the Jewish public was not accustomed to experimental theater, and opted instead to return to Poland while his colleagues crossed the Atlantic.⁵⁰⁵ When journalists accused the Vilna Troupe's productions of being outmoded and stale, there was thus initially no experienced director that Azro and Alomis could turn to for new stagings. After leaving New York, however, Azro and Alomis managed to recruit the Vilna Troupe's other celebrated director, Leib Kadison, from Mazo's European Vilna Troupe branch. Kadison's motivation for coming to America was largely personal: his sister was in America by herself and longed for the rest of the family to join her.⁵⁰⁶ By the time the company returned to New York in September of 1926, it could boast of an entirely new repertoire.

This new repertoire was primarily authored by European playwrights, in an attempt to counter the general feeling among American Yiddish theatergoers that the Vilna Troupe was behind the times. The Troupe opened its second New York season at the Liptzin Theater with a Yiddish version of Alexei Tolstoy and Pavel Shcheglov's historical drama *Rasputin, or the Czarina's Plot*, followed by translations of plays by the German-Jewish dramatist Gustav Kadelburg, the Dutch-Jewish writer Herman Heijermans, and the Russian-Jewish playwright

⁵⁰⁵ Chybowska, 12.

⁵⁰⁶ Luba Kadison, int. with Leah Shlanger, 1987.

Semyon Yushkevich.⁵⁰⁷ In Chicago, Kadison even directed a new version of *The Dybbuk* that attempted to address the critics' concerns about pacing, tone, and the overall quality of the staging.⁵⁰⁸ He also introduced his own version of Avrom Goldfaden's classic Yiddish operetta *The Two Kuni Lemls*, a play that had taken New York by storm in 1924 in a modernist adaptation at Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater. The Troupe also added five new American members to its ranks, all of whom were card-carrying members of the powerful Hebrew Actor's Union. Still, in spite of these efforts to woo American theatergoers back to the Vilna Troupe, the public remained unimpressed. By the end of 1926, Azro and Alomis' branch of the Vilna Troupe folded and the actors went their separate ways. Some returned to Europe, while others joined Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater and other like-minded American Yiddish theater companies. The more stubborn actors set out on their own. Noah Nachbush, who was notoriously elitist about theater, maintained that the artistic level of the American Yiddish theater was beneath him and spent the next few decades giving solo performances of monologues and Yiddish folksongs around the country, marketing himself as "one of the founders of the original Vilna Troupe."⁵⁰⁹ Azro and Alomis also refused to join another theater company and traveled the world as a duo, performing dialogues and scenes from the Vilna Troupe's repertoire. When that work dried up, Azro turned to repairing watches in order to pay his bills. The Vilna Troupe had come to America hoping to find a permanent home at last. Instead, this branch of the company lasted no

⁵⁰⁷ In 1927, Tolstoy and Shchegolov's drama would become the basis for Edwin Piscator's famous production *Rasputin, the Romanovs, the War, and the People who Rose against Them*. On Piscator's production, see Timothy Youker, "'The Destiny of Words': Documentary Theatre, the Avant-Garde, and the Politics of Form," Ph.D. Diss., Columbia University, 2012, 108-115.

⁵⁰⁸ Program for *The Dybbuk* in Chicago, Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Programs Collection 8, Folder PM-23 Vilna Troupe/USA, Harvard Judaica Division. Leib Kadison played the role of Reb Sender Binitser and directed the production.

⁵⁰⁹ Nachbush was "an elitist when it came to theater," recalled his great-nephew Dan Ben-Amos. "I knew about Stanislavsky when I was ten years old." Dan Ben-Amos, interview by author, Mt. Airy, PA, 30 September 2012.

more than two years in the United States before disintegrating. This was the end of Azro and Alomis' branch of the Vilna Troupe, which had been celebrated across Western Europe for its artistic integrity and vision. Over the years, various displaced *Vilner* tried to revive the American branch of the company, but no attempt was ever successful. The Vilna Troupe, renowned across Europe, had met its match in America.

Yet, just as the failure of Y.L. Peretz's theater campaign laid the groundwork for the Vilna Troupe, the Vilna Troupe's inability to thrive in America was also a "significant failure" that made key contributions to the American Yiddish stage. First, while *individual* Yiddish actors had been crossing the Atlantic for decades, prior to the Vilna Troupe no European Yiddish theater *company* had ever traveled to the United States. The Vilna Troupe was thus the first European Jewish theatrical organization to intentionally bring a discrete artistic vision across the Atlantic. As a foreign company that, at least initially, disavowed competition with the American Yiddish theaters, the Vilna Troupe was uniquely able to bring new theatrical ideas to American Jewish performers without facing opposition from local directors and producers. Its American audiences tended to include just as many fellow theater practitioners as ordinary theatergoers.⁵¹⁰ It was generally uncommon for American Yiddish actors to attend each other's productions, as competition between New York's eleven Yiddish theaters was fierce. The Vilna Troupe, in contrast, brought the entire American Yiddish theater community together with the explicit goal of learning from the visiting artists. Thus, in spite of its failure to achieve lasting success in

⁵¹⁰ "With the Vilna Troupe we have something completely different," wrote one reviewer in the *Forverts*, "The stage was filled with utterly new actors, while our actors sat in the theater as the audience." Led Pensil, 3.

America, the Vilna Troupe's presence in New York sparked new conversations among American Yiddish theater artists about artistic style, repertoire, and standards.⁵¹¹

Second, the Vilna Troupe's U.S. tour inspired American Jewish theater artists and critics to reconsider the role of *Jewish* content on the American Yiddish stage. In comparison with the Vilna Troupe, the offerings of the American Yiddish stage seemed decidedly "*goyish*" to many observers, who argued that the American Yiddish theater needed to rediscover its Jewish identity. The actors of the Vilna Troupe, wrote Koralnik in *Der tog*, expressed their dedication to Jewish identity and Jewish cultural continuity in every onstage action, gesture, and word.

They [the actors] stand closer to the source [of Jewishness] – the ancient Jewish melodies sing within them, along with the fire that once warmed and guarded the Jewish soul, the fire that vanished, leaving behind almost nothing but ash that grows colder and colder from generation to generation. They alone guard this treasure.⁵¹²

For Koralnik and other American Yiddish critics, the Vilna Troupe symbolized the indomitability of "authentic" Jewish culture.⁵¹³ The actors seemed to have unique access to the ancient spiritual wisdom of the Jewish people, and it was the staging of this *spiritual / national* knowledge that made their productions so compelling to Jewish audiences. For example, wrote Koralnik, in the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* the Messenger was no mere character – he was Judaism personified. The play was no simple drama but "a continuation of the ancient Song of Songs, wrapped up in Kabbalah, an echo of ancient love songs braided together with Torah, with

⁵¹¹ Jacob Ben-Ami, when asked about the Vilna Troupe's American visit, spoke strongly of the Troupe's impact on American Yiddish theater performers. "They contributed great individuals to the Yiddish art theatre movement in New York," replied Ben-Ami, "[...] They also raised the standards of taste for better plays." Quoted in Lifson, 636.

⁵¹² Koralnik, 5.

⁵¹³ Writing for *Der tog*, Vladimir Grossman similarly extolled the Vilna Troupe as "the only site where the true spirit of the Jewish stage still glows." Vladimir Grosman, "Der groyser shprung fun dem 'dibek' biz tsu der 'neveye'," *Der tog*, 6 February 1924, 5.

holiness.”⁵¹⁴ The Vilna Troupe was thus perceived by American Yiddish journalists as embracing the Jewish particularity of its source material, a strategy that stood in sharp contrast to the strong pull of Americanization on Second Avenue.

Third, although its productions were not particularly well received, the Vilna Troupe’s presence in New York attracted the attention of several major figures from the mainstream American stage, most notably David Belasco. Belasco faithfully attended every production of the Vilna Troupe’s first season in New York, met with the actors after the curtain fell, and wrote them fan mail about how inspired he was by their performances. Azro and Alomis were careful to mention Belasco’s interest in their company at every opportunity. When Belasco wrote to the members of the Vilna Troupe praising their style, Azro bought full-page advertisements in the *Forverts* and reprinted Belasco’s letters (translated, of course, into Yiddish) in their entirety.⁵¹⁵ These letters were extremely positive and their tone reminded many readers of the laudatory assessments of the European critics. As Belasco described the Vilna Troupe’s performance of *Green Fields* in March 1924:

Dear friends,
I had the pleasure to see you perform and I feel that it was an honor to have had this privilege. The sublimity of your artistic performance was a revelation for me. I hope that you will extend the duration of your stay with us, so that every true devotee of the best stage art will have the opportunity and pleasure to see your productions. [...]

Yours,
David Belasco⁵¹⁶

⁵¹⁴ Koralnik, 5.

⁵¹⁵ Incidentally, these were the only full-page ads that the Vilna Troupe ever ran in America. Its ads were generally quite modest and smaller than those of other Yiddish theater companies, in keeping with the company’s non-commercial image.

⁵¹⁶ I have not been able to locate Belasco’s original letter, which was dated March 3, 1924, in the archives of the Vilna Troupe actors. This is my translation of the Yiddish translation that was reprinted in the *Forverts*. “Dovid Belasko shraybt tsu der ‘Vilner trupe’,” *Forverts*, 7 March 1924, 7.

Belasco's interest in the Vilna Troupe continued long after attention from other prominent figures had waned.

Also among the non-Jewish theater practitioners who first encountered the Vilna Troupe in America were the artists of the Moscow Art Theater. The Moscow Art Theater had been the inspiration for the formation of the original Vilna Troupe back in Europe, but the two companies had never directly encountered one another until they met in New York. While it is unclear when exactly Stanislavsky would have first learned of the Vilna Troupe's existence, the Moscow Art Theater's attendance at the *Dybbuk* premiere demonstrates just how far the Troupe's reputation had reached. By 1924, the Vilna Troupe was a major fixture on the international art theater scene, and its activities were followed by mainstream theater directors of the caliber of Stanislavsky and Belasco.

Finally, the Vilna Troupe's American tour also inspired other Yiddish theater artists to develop cross-continental artistic networks and touring practices of their own. In the aftermath of the company's American debut, European Yiddish theaters planned their own American tours. Likewise, American Yiddish theater companies began to dream of success in London, Paris, Berlin, and Warsaw. The members of Azro and Alomis' branch of the Vilna Troupe were thus cosmopolitan pioneers, suggesting new cross-continental possibilities for other Yiddish theater companies to achieve recognition in a global context.

“The *Vilner* in New York and the *Nyuyorkers* in London!”⁵¹⁷

So proclaimed the headline in the *Forverts* when Maurice Schwartz announced that he would soon be bringing his Yiddish Art Theater company to Europe for the first time. Inspired by the Vilna Troupe's transatlantic tour, Schwartz hoped to repeat its extraordinary march across

⁵¹⁷ “Di Vilner in Nyuyork,” 3.

Europe with his own company. In February 1924, Schwartz gave a speech at a banquet in his honor announcing that his entire twenty-person troupe, including their stage manager, three carpenters, and a costumer, would be sailing to Europe in a few weeks. Critics responded with enthusiasm. At last, an American Yiddish theater company would join the ranks of internationally famous theater ensembles like the Vilna Troupe and the Moscow Art Theater, crowned the *Forverts*. Eastern European Jews had graciously sent their Vilna Troupe to the United States, but now it was the American Yiddish theater's turn to show off its record of achievement in Europe. In his speech announcing the tour, Schwartz explicitly credited the Vilna Troupe for inspiring his travel plans. The Vilna Troupe had not only shown that a successful cross-continental tour was possible, Schwartz told the crowd of theatergoers, writers, and journalists, but it had also demonstrated just how much American Yiddish actors could learn from visiting Europe.

While the Vilna Troupe's American tour had broken new ground in the Yiddish theater industry by becoming the first company to cross the Atlantic, Schwartz's tour of Europe was in many ways even more pioneering. For decades prior to the Vilna Troupe's arrival, American Jewish theatergoers had seen hundreds of individual European Yiddish actors perform on their shores. A majority of the directors, actors, playwrights, and producers of Second Avenue were immigrants to the United States; indeed, it was the rare American Yiddish theater artist who was a native. As early as the 1880's, American Yiddish theater managers made frequent trips to Eastern Europe to search for new talent. Many of the towering figures of the American Yiddish

stage, including Sigmund Mogulesco, David Kessler, Leon Blank, Regina Prager, and Bertha Kalish, were recruited to the United States by traveling theater scouts.⁵¹⁸

In contrast, European audiences in 1924 had only rarely had the opportunity to see American Yiddish actors perform. A few European-born theater artists who had spent significant time in America (most notably Clara and Boaz Young in the 1910s) enjoyed great success performing the “American repertoire” across Eastern Europe.⁵¹⁹ Other European actors, like Yankev Spivakovski and Sam and Julius Adler, visited America briefly before returning to Europe.⁵²⁰ Boris Thomashefsky performed occasionally in Europe, as did a handful of other American Yiddish actors, including Molly Picon, whose European fame preceded her American breakthrough. But with only a handful of exceptions, it was relatively uncommon to see American performers on the European Yiddish stage. For many European Jews, then, the 1924 transatlantic tour of Schwartz’s Yiddish Art Theater was the first time they had ever seen American Yiddish actors, let alone an entire American Yiddish theater company.

The Yiddish Art Theater planned its European tour flush with success from the most well received season in the company’s history. The 1923-24 season had opened with a stunning production of Zhulovsky’s historical drama *Shabbatai Zvi* that featured a massive cast of 30 actors and more than 30 extras. This production was frequently cited by journalists and Yiddish theater historians as a major turning point for the company, the first in Schwartz’s new brand of high art productions with sophisticated production values. The lineup for the season included ten

⁵¹⁸ On the transatlantic travel of New York’s Yiddish talent scouts, see Nina Warnke, “Going East: The Impact of American Yiddish Plays and Players on the Yiddish Stage in Czarist Russia, 1890-1914,” *American Jewish History* 92.1 (March 2004): 7-8.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid, 26-28.

⁵²⁰ Ibid, 8-12.

plays, each of which received better reviews than the last.⁵²¹ In addition, Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater became home to a new school of acting during this season.⁵²² Sunday morning lectures at the Garden Theater complemented the theater's weekly offerings and attracted a new core of younger intellectuals to its audience. By the time the Vilna Troupe arrived in 1924, the Yiddish Art Theater had become New York's primary center for intellectual performance, conversation, and theatrical training.

When the Vilna Troupe had first announced its plans for an American tour, many in New York initially feared that it would be the death knell of Schwartz's company. Schwartz's theater, while successful, was by no means inundated with spectators. The companies were similar, perhaps too similar, in their aesthetic and repertoire (journalists sometimes playfully referred to Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater as "The American Vilna Troupe" and vice versa).⁵²³ Intellectuals were concerned – what if the Vilna Troupe's tour inadvertently caused the demise of the best company on the American Yiddish stage? Schwartz's theater had never been particularly financially solvent, and box office receipts often did not match up with the critical success of its productions among Jewish writers and intellectuals. The Yiddish Art Theater, wrote one worried journalist prior to the Vilna Troupe's opening performance, is "the only place where an intelligent spectator can spend a few hours with true pleasure" and has "without a doubt, the best audience that one can find in New York, which is exactly the audience that is

⁵²¹ Among the plays Schwartz presented this season were: Andreyev's *The Seven Who Were Hanged*, Osip Dimov's *Bread*, Goldfaden's *The Two Kuni Lemls*, H. Leivick's *Beggars*, and Ernst Toller's *Blood Laughter*. Only *Beggars* flopped; the rest were tremendously successful. See Boris, 129-130.

⁵²² The acting students provided a seemingly endless source of extras for the company's new massive productions. Several, including Zvi Scooler and Ben Zion Katz, eventually worked their way up to active membership in the company and became major Yiddish actors in their own right. *Ibid.*, 131.

⁵²³ See, for example, Led Pensil, 3 and Frumkin, 4.

impatiently awaiting the productions of the Vilna Troupe.”⁵²⁴ Many expected the Vilna Troupe’s premiere to be catastrophic for Schwartz’s company.

Instead, the Yiddish Art Theater became *more* successful than ever in the spring of 1924. If anything, the decline of the American branch of the Vilna Troupe only served to further the Yiddish Art Theater’s reputation. The announcement that Schwartz and his actors would soon be touring Europe only cemented the sense that the Yiddish Art Theater was a rising star on the international art theater scene. To American Yiddish theatergoers, the fact that European theater producers were offering to bring Schwartz and his entire company across the Atlantic was proof that this home-grown group of theater artists was indeed on par with world-famous groups like the Vilna Troupe and perhaps even the Moscow Art Theater.⁵²⁵

Indeed, the Yiddish Art Theater’s European tour was every bit as successful as Schwartz had hoped. Echoing the Vilna Troupe’s Western European tour two years earlier, Schwartz’s troupe was a sensation in London, Paris, and Vienna. In England, members of Parliament invited the actors to tea on the terrace of the Parliament building. In Austria, the Yiddish Art Theater performed at the Carltheater, Vienna’s leading opera house, where they played to full houses for over a month.⁵²⁶

Taken together, these two cross-continental tours in 1924 (the Yiddish Art Theater’s travels in Western Europe, inspired by the Vilna Troupe’s American tour) marked the dawn of a new era of global travel for Yiddish theater artists. Just as the first international tour of

⁵²⁴ Frumkin, 4.

⁵²⁵ These offers, unfortunately, did not include travel funding, and at first Schwartz and his company struggled to figure out a way to raise the necessary funds. In the end, they leased their theater building to the Democratic Party for its summer caucus in exchange for \$10,000, which covered the trip to London in full. See Boris, 135.

⁵²⁶ Despite strong ticket sales in all three European cities, the Yiddish Art Theater struggled to meet its expenses and returned home in debt. Wages were higher in London than in New York, and travel expenses were higher than expected. *Ibid.*, 137-142.

Schwartz's Art Theater legitimized the company as being on par with other global sensations, so too did cross-continental touring become associated with high art success on the Yiddish stage. Successful reception by audiences across the globe became a means of proving one's artistic credentials.

Inspired by these twin tours, journalists proclaimed that a new era of cosmopolitanism was dawning for the Yiddish theater, in which Jews around the world would share in a single theatrical culture. Indeed, by the late 1920's, it was common for Yiddish theater artists from Eastern Europe and America to embark on ambitious international tours, crisscrossing back and forth across the Atlantic and beyond, to Argentina, South Africa, and even Australia. During the summer off-season, it soon became standard practice for New York actors to include South American cities like Buenos Aires and Montevideo along with the regular summer tour circuit of Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit, Montreal, and Cincinnati. Frequent travel brought Yiddish actors into contact with other theater practitioners, both Jewish and non-Jewish, around the globe, creating new transnational artistic networks that added to those already established by the Vilna Troupe and Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater.

PART THREE:
SIXTY CITIES A YEAR

“We were so absorbed in what we were doing under the worst of conditions. So our manager, Mazo, would rent a train with bare benches. And we had to sleep through the night, for instance, to go from - long distances, sometimes, from Jassy to Bucharest, or other places, so many places we went. So we would have little pillows, and we would just sleep on the train.”

- Luba Kadison⁵²⁷

During all of this – while Azro and Alomis’s reputation rose and fell in America and Maurice Schwartz’s Yiddish Art Theater took over their vacated role as the new Yiddish darlings of the Western European stage – Mordechai Mazo’s branch of the Vilna Troupe continued to plot an ambitious travel schedule across Eastern Europe. After its extraordinary 1924 success in Bucharest with *The Singer of His Sorrow*, the Troupe traveled extensively through the Romanian countryside, playing to packed houses in Jassy, Kishinev, Belz, Czernowitz, and other cities and towns, before returning to Bucharest for an encore season by popular demand. In Czernowitz, the 100th performance of *Singer of His Sorrow* was celebrated in the streets by a crowd so large that the Romanian police, fearing a mob, prohibited Mazo from giving the speech he had planned.⁵²⁸

As the company’s reputation continued to grow, so too did the pace of its travels. Between January and August of 1925, this branch of the Vilna Troupe visited 20 cities and towns across Romania.⁵²⁹ By 1930, the company regularly performed in a minimum of sixty cities each year.⁵³⁰ Its tours followed a well-established trajectory across Eastern Europe, as the company returned to the same cities and towns again and again, often multiple times a year. Mazo’s actors could count on following a relatively consistent tour circuit. When the Vilna Troupe left

⁵²⁷ Luba Kadison, int. by Louise Cleveland, 1980.

⁵²⁸ Khayim Geler, “Di ‘Vilner’ in Yerusholayim d’Rumenie,” *Literarishe bleter*, 7 August 1925, 9.

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

⁵³⁰ Nakhman Mayzel, “Fuftsn yor Vilner trupe,” *Literarishe bleter*, 20 February 1931, 138.

Lemberg for Krakow, the Galician countryside, and Warsaw in the summer of 1927, the actors knew they would return before winter. After years of wandering from one new place to another without knowing what the future would hold, Mazo's Vilna Troupe had finally settled into a comfortable travel routine that provided its actors some measure of predictability and the ability to maintain relationships with family and friends outside of the company.

But to the itinerant actors, Warsaw was the only place that felt like home. By 1927, 90% of the Vilna Troupe's performers hailed from Warsaw, and many looked forward to spending time with their relatives while visiting the Polish capital.⁵³¹ While the Troupe continued to travel with frequency, its tours during this period almost always started and ended with lengthy periods of time in Warsaw.

Still, full stability continued to elude Mazo's *Vilner*. By the mid-1920's, the composition of this branch continued to change at a rapid pace, as actors joined and left the company between one production and the next. In the space of a single year, it was not uncommon for Mazo to lose nearly all of his actors, who were quickly replaced by eager newcomers. In the summer of 1927, for instance, the Vilna Troupe in Lviv consisted of the following actors:

Chava Ayzn	Avrom Morevsky
Chaim Brakarzh	Naomi Natan
Dovid Herman (dir.)	Simcha Natan
Rokhl Holtzer	Miriam Orleska
Yosef Kamien	Jacob Waislitz
Nadia Kareni	Yocheved Waislitz
Mordechai Mazo (mngr.)	Simcha Vaynshtok ⁵³²

Seven months later, Mazo's same Vilna Troupe opened in Warsaw with the following members (* indicates actors who had been a part of the company in Lviv):

⁵³¹ Turkow-Grudberg, *Varshe dos vigele*, 19-20.

⁵³² Members of Mazo's Vilna Troupe as of August 12, 1927.

Dovid Birnboym	Naomi Natan*
Esther Goldenberg	Simcha Natan*
Helena Gotlib	Miriam Orleska*
Zalmen Hirshfeld	Esther Rapel
Yosef Kamien*	Perl Ruth
Dina Kamien	Isaac Samberg
Batsheva Kremer	Shmuel Sheftel
Yankev Kurlender	Ruth Taru
Dovid Likht	Mikhl Weichert (dir.)
Yankev Mansdorf	Jacob Waislitz* ⁵³³
Mordechai Mazo (mngr)*	

In just a few months time, more than seventy-five percent of the company had changed over to new members. This rapid turnover was a pattern that would continue to repeat throughout the 1920's and 30's. These "new" actors, however, did not simply emerge out of nowhere. More often than not, they tended to be connected, at least tangentially, with other current or past Vilna Troupe affiliates. Isaac Samberg, for example, had been a member of Mazo's Vilna Troupe in 1923-24, and had directed several successful Vilna Troupe productions including Sholem Aleichem's *Dos groyse gevins* [*The Big Win*] and a Yiddish translation of Moliere's *The Miser*. After taking a break from the Vilna Troupe to guest star in other companies across Europe, he returned in 1928, bringing with him his wife and artistic partner Helena Gotlib, who specialized in playing maternal characters. A younger member, Yankev Mansdorf, had studied under Dovid Herman as a member of his Warsaw Yiddish Drama School, and later worked as an actor in Herman's experimental studio and in his cabaret company Azazel. Dovid Likht had been a fellow Herman student and member of the studio before joining the Vilna Troupe, while Ruth Taru had also trained under Herman in Azazel. Simcha Natan had formerly acted alongside Vilna Troupe regulars Avrom Morevsky, Alex Stein, Joseph Kamien, and Joseph Buloff before

⁵³³ Members of Mazo's Vilna Troupe as of March 28, 1928.

joining Mazo's branch of the company in 1925, where he appeared on and off throughout the 20's and 30's. Shmuel Sheftel was a relative of original Vilna Troupe member Noah Nachbush, who had defected to Azro and Alomis' branch and gone to America.

The constantly shifting roster of Vilna Troupe actors was augmented by the formation of new branches of the company during the late 1920's. In mid-1927, a bitter quarrel led several actors to form a second Eastern European branch of the Vilna Troupe, while others opted to try their luck in America.⁵³⁴ Both attempts were short-lived, each lasting only a few months. Later, there were also the actors, drawn equally from Mazo's Vilna Troupe and the now defunct American branch, who formed a new Vilna Troupe in Brussels in 1929 under the leadership of Azro and Alomis. This Belgian branch was the only Vilna Troupe in the entire twenty-year history of these companies that did not travel. This strategy was not particularly successful, and the group disbanded after a single season. A few months later, a group of former Vilner actors who found themselves out of work in America would found another Vilna Troupe company in the Bronx, bringing the total number of Vilna Troupes to seven.⁵³⁵

The Vilna Troupe in the late 1920's was at once more influential and less stable than ever before. After the dissolution of the American branch of the Vilna Troupe, an association with the Vilna Troupe name could no longer predict a company's success. Indeed, many Vilna Troupes folded during these years, one after the other. By 1930, only Mazo's company was still standing. There would be no more competition among companies over which was more authentic. Eleven years after his argument with Azro and Alomis, Mazo had finally won the quarrel.

⁵³⁴ Waislitz, "Der gang in der velt," 44.

⁵³⁵ The seven Vilna Troupes were: the original company (1915-1919), Mazo's Vilna Troupe, Azro and Alomis' Vilna Troupe, the second Eastern European Vilna Troupe in 1927, the second American Vilna Troupe, also in 1927, the Brussels company, and the Bronx Vilna Troupe.

Why did Mazo's Vilna Troupe outlast all of the others? First, his Troupe brought in a constant influx of young talent during these years to replace older members who left. The new actors brought youthful energy to the company, along with a passion for cutting-edge theatrical innovation. Unlike their predecessors, many of the younger members of Mazo's Vilna Troupe during the 1920's had completed extensive theatrical training as students in Dovid Herman and Mikhl Weichert's new Yiddish Drama School in Warsaw. While the other Vilna Troupes, with the sole exception of the Bronx-based company, were content to continuing staging plays in the style of *The Dybbuk* and other early 1920's productions that had brought them international acclaim, the younger actors in Mazo's company pushed the others to continue experimenting with new styles and approaches. Thus, while other Vilna Troupes were struggling to compete with newer, younger, and more innovative Yiddish art theater companies, Mazo's Troupe enjoyed its most successful season since *The Dybbuk* in 1928-29 with several ambitious and groundbreaking productions. The success of Mazo's company in the late 1920's was also due to its commitment to developing new repertoire. In this way, Mazo's branch continued to exert a major presence in Eastern Europe, even as the influence of the other Vilna Troupes was declining.

A Grueling Schedule: The New Repertoire

Unlike Azro and Alomis' branch, which tended to present the same core group of plays that had earned the original company its fame (*The Dybbuk*, *Carcass*, *Green Fields*, *The Abandoned Inn*, and *The Village Lad*, and others), Mazo's Vilna Troupe never stopped preparing new repertoire. There was a brief period after *The Dybbuk* when the repertoire for both Vilna Troupes was nearly identical, but Mazo's company did not rest on its laurels for long. Beginning

with its 1924 tour of Romania, the Troupe began to prepare new plays in earnest. Seven new experimental modernist productions were prepared during 1924 alone: from the European dramatic canon, Moliere's *The Miser*, Tolstoy's *The Living Corpse*, Gogol's *Marriage*, Nikolai Yevreinov's *The Chief Thing* (a 1921 commedia-inspired version of Gorky's *The Lower Depths*), and Russian poet Vasily Zhukovsky's drama about the would-be Jewish Messiah, Shabbatai Zvi; along with two modernist productions of Yiddish plays, Alter Kacyzne's *Der dukus* [*The Duke*] and Osip Dimov's *The Singer of His Sorrow*. After the success of these productions in Romania, Mazo continued to add dozens of plays to the company's repertoire each year.

The constant preparation of new repertoire, combined with a robust travel and performance schedule with few breaks, meant a grueling schedule for the Vilna Troupe actors. Financial records from 1926 (meticulously documented by Mazo for Poland's new Yiddish Actors' Union and preserved in their entirety in the YIVO archives) demonstrate the exhausting pace of the company's work during these years. A typical week included eight performances alongside a full rehearsal schedule. Since the company always operated on the repertory system, the actors had to be prepared to play dozens of roles in any given week. For example, this was the Vilna Troupe's schedule for the week of April 23, 1926 at Warsaw's Elysium Theater:

Date	Play	Reg. Tkts	Discount Tkts	Comp. Tkts	Intake (zlotys)	Taxes	Actors' Share
Monday 4/23	<i>Der dibek</i>	110	104	4	473.50	32.25	100
Tuesday 4/24	<i>Zinger fun zayn troyer</i>	75	115	9	364.50	21.24	86.40
Wednesday 4/25	<i>Motke ganef</i>	124	80	18	429.5	18.61	127.3
Thursday 4/26	<i>Der nisoyen</i>	48	117	12	361.5	18.61	127.3
Friday 4/27	<i>Di untervelt</i>	108	152	13	550.5	75.53	127.3
Saturday 4/28 (mat.)	<i>Der dibek</i>	161	65	2	510	59.22	(comb. with Sat evening)
Saturday 4/28 (eve.)	<i>Der nisoyen</i>	289	55	8	1072	114.91	356.85
Sunday 4/29	<i>Di untervelt</i>	177	179	20	856.5	96.28	124.75
TOTAL:		1092	867	86	4618	436.65	1049.9

Figure 4: The Vilna Troupe's productions at the Elysium Theater in Warsaw, April 23 – April 30, 1926⁵³⁶

With the premiere of an original dramatic adaptation of Sholem Asch's massive novel *Kidush Hashem* [Sanctification of the Name] scheduled for the following Wednesday, May 3rd, the actors rehearsed feverishly while presenting eight shows a week. There would be no time off before opening night – the company stopped performing for only two days in order to hold fifteen-hour dress rehearsals before nightly performances resumed. Indeed, between January and June of 1926, the Vilna Troupe only took five days off: one long weekend in January, a Thursday night in February, and a Monday night in April to accommodate a lecture by *Kidush*

⁵³⁶ "Vokhn barikht fun 23 April biz 30 April, Vilner Trupe." Yidisher artistisher fareyn (Warsaw) records (RG 26), Box 12, Folder 269 – Vilna Trupe, YIVO.

Hashem's director Mikhl Weichert, which the actors were required to attend. With the sole exception of those five evenings, the Vilna Troupe performed eight shows a week without fail. This breakneck schedule continued even when the actors were on the road.

The frantic pace of performances, rehearsals, and travel may, in part, explain why so many actors only spent a short time in the Vilna Troupe before leaving for other companies. Mazo's ambitions were too great, the rehearsal schedule too stringent, the constant travel too exhausting. Only Miriam Orleska (reportedly Mazo's lover) stayed by his side for nearly twenty years. A handful of other semi-permanent members spent years affiliated with Mazo's Vilna Troupe, but they were in the minority. Most actors who performed with this branch of the Vilna Troupe were company members for less than a year, if that. To be a member of the Vilna Troupe was to commit one's entire life to acting, to live and breathe theater twelve hours a day or more, to put aside all personal desires, hobbies, and relationships for the collective good of the company. Few were able to sustain the pace for long.

These financial records also demonstrate the Vilna Troupe's continued ability to attract large audiences during the late 1920's. In the space of a single week in April, the Vilna Troupe performed before more than two thousand theatergoers. This was a typical week for the Vilna Troupe, which often attracted even more spectators to its newest productions. During the first three weeks of *Kidush Hashem* performances, for example, an average of 2500 people attended Vilna Troupe performances each week. During its final week in Warsaw for the season, the Vilna Troupe sold 3260 tickets to a single week's performances. Government taxes, building rental fees, and massive production costs cut into the Troupe's earnings significantly, and, with 15-30 actors in the company at any given time, there was rarely much left over for each individual member even when ticket sales were at their highest. Still, the earnings were enough

to sustain the company, pay travel costs, fund new productions, and provide the actors with a meager salary. For most of the actors, this was enough – at least for a time. And when they were ready for a change, there was always a fresh crop of energetic actors eager to take their place.

Martyrs, O'Neill, Gargoyles, and Shakespeare: The 1928-29 Season

The 1928-29 season was the culmination of the development of Mazo's Vilna Troupe, and featured its most innovative productions since *The Singer of His Sorrow* in 1924. In a season full of hits, there were four productions in particular that captivated theatergoers with groundbreaking "colossal" stagings that required an extremely high level of technical sophistication: Sholem Asch's historical drama of martyrdom and massacre *Kidush Hashem* in May 1928 (dir. Mikhl Weichert), a Yiddish translation of Eugene O'Neill's Greek tragedy-inspired drama *Desire Under the Elms* (dir. Avrom Taytlboym) in August, Y.L. Peretz's symbolist verse drama *Bay nakht afn altn mark* [*At Night in the Old Marketplace*] in November (dir. Dovid Herman), and *Shylock*, a Yiddish adaptation of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* by Yisroel Stern and Mark Rakovsky (dir. Mikhl Weichert) in February 1929. Each of these productions featured the kinds of accoutrements and technical achievements that had long been considered impossible for the Yiddish theater: dozens of sets, hundreds of costumes, a full orchestra, massive casts, large crowds of extras, and even projections of still images onto unadorned set pieces.

For over a decade, the innovations introduced by the Vilna Troupe and the other Yiddish art theaters had been largely confined to new modes of acting (i.e. the full integration of the ensemble) and directing (such as Herman's fusion modernist aesthetic for *The Dybbuk* or Buloff's larger-than-life expressionist vision in *The Singer of His Sorrow*). In the past, the

various Vilna Troupes and their Yiddish art theater colleagues had rarely experimented with technical innovation, at least not on purpose. Since the Vilna Troupe's designers always had to develop portable sets, costumes, and lighting that could be transported cheaply and easily, they tended to favor simple, streamlined designs that could work in many different types of theatrical spaces. In large cities, the Vilna Troupe often performed in grand proscenium theaters; in smaller towns, however, the Troupe had to be prepared to work almost anywhere. Occasionally, accidental mishaps during travel led to the adoption of new design strategies. Traveling in the Polish provinces, for instance, the Vilna Troupe once ran out of cash partway through a tour and could not pay the theater building's owner for electricity. Desperate, Mazo spent hours manually rigging the electrical cables to circumvent the theater's system, producing an eerie and unusual lighting effect in the process.⁵³⁷

But *intentional* design innovation was new ground for the Vilna Troupe. Focusing on design required a measure of location-based stability that no branch of the company had ever had – until 1928. Indeed, the 1928-29 season was the only significant period of time that any Vilna Troupe had ever remained in one place. From May 1928 to May 1929, Mazo's branch of the Vilna Troupe performed almost exclusively in Warsaw, with only a brief one-month hiatus when the actors took *Kidush Hashem* and *Bay nakht* on tour to other Polish cities. Not only did the Vilna Troupe virtually cease to travel for the first time in its history, but it also secured a year-long lease on the historic Elysium theater where Mazo's company had presented the world premiere of *The Dybbuk* eight years earlier. Never again would the company be more stable; never again would its actors' schedules be more predictable. For a single year, the notoriously itinerant company had found a home.

⁵³⁷ Luba Kadison, int. by Louise Cleveland, 1980.

Mazo's 1928-29 season thus represents an important counterpoint to the sustained itinerancy of the Vilna Troupes over the course of two decades. On the surface, the company's record of innovation during this season might seem to suggest, as Yiddish theater critics of the period frequently complained, that the Vilna Troupe had long been hobbled by having to travel so frequently. But the Vilna Troupe's achievements during this season were actually the culmination of years of geographical mobility. The actors and directors, accustomed to decades of constant travel, did not take having a fixed location and a theater space that they could call their own lightly. Instead, they embraced their newfound stability as an opportunity to stage a series of ambitious and colossal productions. As perpetual travelers, Mazo and his Vilna Troupe were well aware of new trends in constructivist set design and recent advances in lighting and projection technology; until now, however, they had neither had the means nor a theater space with which to experiment with design. A yearlong residence at the Elysium Theater provided the perfect platform for the company to finally try out the innovative approaches that the actors had encountered on their travels.

In fact, the Vilna Troupe's new focus on design innovation was initially an effort to make the company's productions more portable. The Warsaw residency was not originally the plan for the 1928-29 season. At first, the actors expected that they would perform a brief run of their dramatization of Sholem Asch's historical novel *Kidush Hashem* for a few weeks in Warsaw, before continuing to travel across Poland and Romania, as they had done so many times in the past. Their new director Mikhl Weichert, who had studied avant-garde theater in Berlin under Max Reinhardt, suggested that perhaps the Troupe could employ new projection technology to solve a recurring design problem. Because the Vilna Troupe never knew what kind of space they

would be performing in next, the company's set designs often seemed ill-suited to most of the theater buildings that housed their productions.

After relocating to Warsaw, Weichert had remained in close correspondence with his former colleagues in Berlin, and they frequently exchanged letters that detailed their recent productions. It was via this ongoing transnational correspondence that Weichert learned that German directors like Reinhardt and Edwin Piscator had begun to experiment with a new optical device called the Linnebach projector. The Linnebach projector, a lensless system that projected shadows and simple shapes, had been invented at the turn of the century by German lighting expert Adolph Linnebach. It was not until the development of high-wattage filament lamps in the early 1920's that the Linnebach lantern could be used to project sharp images onto a set or cloth drop, making it an attractive tool for avant-garde theater directors.⁵³⁸

The Linnebach projector's simple design, which could be easily reproduced with cheap materials, coupled with its portability made it an especially attractive option for an itinerant Yiddish theater company. Do-it-yourself instructions on how to build a Linnebach lantern out of plywood or scrap metal were widely circulated in magazines and theater journals. "Anyone can build a Linnebach lantern and anyone can paint reasonably effective slides," claimed one instruction manual.⁵³⁹ Cheap and portable, the Linnebach projector seemed almost tailor made to fit the needs of the Yiddish stage. A low-profile projector, Weichert explained to Mazo and the others, would be much easier to travel with than the bulky set pieces that the actors were accustomed to lugging along on the train. With more storage space, the Vilna Troupe could also

⁵³⁸ See Max Keller, *Light Fantastic: The Art and Design of Stage Lighting* (New York: Prestel, 2010), 156-157; Gwendolyn Waltz, "Filmed Scenery on the Live Stage," *Theatre Journal* 58.4 (December 2006): 547-573; Thomas Wilfred, "The Projected Setting," *Educational Theatre Journal* 6.2 (May 1954): 136-144; and "New Stagecraft Lifts Scenes Through Floor and Paints Them with Light," *Popular Science* 102.2 (February 1923): 38-39.

⁵³⁹ Charles L. Balcer, "Audio-Visual Aids: Building and Using a Linnebach Lantern," *The Speech Teacher* 13.2 (1964): 155.

bring along more lighting equipment and costumes on its travels (Weichert suggested 150 individual costume pieces for *Kidush Hashem*, an unprecedented number for a Vilna Troupe production). More importantly for the Vilna Troupe, replacing static set pieces with dynamic projections would enable the company to instantly tailor the scenery to fit whatever space it happened to find itself in. “The designs needed to develop organically out of the scenographic vision,” Weichert explained to reporters in a 1928 interview. “We had to project them, so that they would fit on every stage – even the most primitive ones – and so that they could change as quick as lightning.”⁵⁴⁰ The action of *Kidush Hashem* moved quickly between a diverse array of locales; from the steppes to the synagogue, from Bogdan Chmielnitsky’s military fortress to the domestic arena of a *shtetl* home. Projections, in addition to being more portable and economical than traditional set pieces, also allowed for the kind of seamless transitions between scenes that would make producing a play with so many settings a viable option.

In addition to introducing projections to the Yiddish stage for the first time, Weichert also recruited a team of visual artists and design specialists – professional painters, hairdressers, makeup artists, tailors, electricians, furriers, carpenters, and machinists – to collaborate in developing an innovative scenographic vision for his adaptation of *Kidush Hashem*. Asch’s historical novel, which detailed the experiences of one family during the anti-Jewish massacres of the Chmielnitsky Uprising in 1648, presented particular challenges for stage adaptation. Weichert’s version turned out to be just as epic in its narrative scope as Asch’s original, and included 25 distinct scenes, more than half of which depicted clashes between Cossack fighters and Jewish victims and thus required large crowds of people. The Troupe contracted Warsaw’s local Jewish chorale group, nearly 100 members strong, to perform as extras. Weichert also

⁵⁴⁰ Y.B., “Hinter di kulisn fun der *Kidush-hashem* oyffirung: a shmues mit Mikhl Vaykhert.” *Literarishe bleter*, 25 May 1928, 410.

collaborated with composer Henekh Kon to develop an elaborate instrumental score for the production. For the first time in the Vilna Troupe's history, the actors were accompanied by a full orchestra. Between the actors, the chorus, and the musicians, there were over 150 individuals involved in the production. Four full workshops full of costumers worked day and night to outfit the enormous cast. Coordinating all of these people, many of whom had never acted on stage before, was a massive undertaking and required a hectic rehearsal schedule. The last dress rehearsal was such a disaster that Weichert kept the entire cast and crew working from 6 in the evening until 6 the next morning.⁵⁴¹ Even seasoned Vilna Troupe actors found themselves nervous as they prepared for the premiere. But in classic Vilna Troupe style, opening night was a riveting success with ovation after ovation. The rush of ticket sales that followed enabled the company to cancel its travel plans and prepare instead for its first full season in Warsaw.

Kiddush Hashem was a massive spectacle on a scale that the European Yiddish theater had rarely seen before. In New York, where companies like Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater were able to own their own theater buildings, or in Russia, where the Moscow State Yiddish Theater (GOSET) was heavily subsidized by the Soviet government, scenographic innovation had long been a major component of the high art Yiddish stage. But in Poland, where Yiddish companies were far more itinerant and theater buildings were generally leased from non-Jewish owners, such an elaborate display of design innovation was unprecedented. Jewish journalists hailed the scenography as "perfect, first class, deeply poetic, and in perfect tune with the mood of the performance."⁵⁴² "An artistic achievement worthy of any European theater

⁵⁴¹ Y.B., 410.

⁵⁴² "Gdzie byłam, co widziałam," *Ewa: pismo tygodniowe*, 13 May 1928, 6. Trans. Zosia Sochanska.

stage,” wrote another.⁵⁴³ Jewish critics compared *Kidush Hashem* favorably with Polish director Leon Schiller’s acclaimed expressionist adaptation of Stefan Żeromski’s *Dzieje grzechu* [*A Story of Sin*] at Teatr Polski in 1926.⁵⁴⁴ Yet while the production was a huge success with Jewish audiences, it attracted very few Polish critics and theatergoers. This was likely because of the play’s subject matter. In scene after scene, *Kidush Hashem* depicted maniacal anti-Semites taking violent action against innocent Jewish families. There were no sympathetic Gentile characters in the entire play. Another Yiddish theater group might have taken the lack of Polish attendance in stride – after all, ticket sales for *Kidush Hashem* were so strong in Warsaw that the Vilna Troupe was able to cease traveling for the first time in decades. But the Vilna Troupe had come to expect a certain level of attention from the non-Jewish mainstream theater, and Mazo and Weichert were extremely disappointed that Polish audiences had failed to acknowledge the company’s most innovative production in years.⁵⁴⁵

Kidush Hashem was followed in October 1928 by a Yiddish translation of Eugene O’Neill’s 1924 drama *Desire Under the Elms*, directed by Avrom Taytlboym. This was the very first production of an O’Neill drama in Poland. During the mid and late 1920’s, O’Neill’s plays were frequently produced in Berlin, London, Paris, Sweden, and across Western Europe, but

⁵⁴³ Jakób Appenszlak, “Scena Żydowska,” *Nasz Przegląd*, 4 May 1928, 5. Trans. Zosia Sochanska.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid. Weichert’s *Kidush hashem* directly adopted Schiller’s adaptation method, which involved taking raw fragments of dialogue from the novel and reproducing them directly on stage rather than trying to rewrite the novel into a play.

⁵⁴⁵ In interviews with the Polish-language Jewish daily *Nasz Przegląd*, Mazo lamented the Polish press’s conscious disregard for the Yiddish theater. “The attitude of the Polish press towards our theater is indeed deplorable. Both abroad and in other Polish cities, like Cracow and Lvov, we attract massive attention. In Warsaw, there was not one mention of our performance. Each time we send invitations to theater critics of the mainstream Polish press, they are ignored. Our performances are not listed in the theater repertoire section. We do, however, have the full support of Polish artistic circles and frequently host prominent Polish artists among our audience.” “Przed nowym sezonem trupy wileńskiej. Rozmowa z dyrektorem Mazo,” *Nasz Przegląd*, 10 October 1928, 5. Trans. Zosia Sochanska.

remained virtually unknown East of Germany, outside of a few productions in Moscow.⁵⁴⁶ The Vilna Troupe was thus the first to introduce Polish theatergoers to America's most famous playwright. Polish directors, who generally lived and worked in Warsaw full-time, were by and large unaware of the playwright's growing reputation across Western Europe and Russia, but the vast global network of itinerant Yiddish theater artists that made up the Vilna Troupe was fully conscious of O'Neill's growing influence. The members of Mazo's company frequently corresponded with former colleagues in the United States. Perhaps some of the actors had even seen a European or Russian O'Neill production while traveling.

Either way, the Vilna Troupe's production of *Desire Under the Elms* was instrumental in inspiring Polish directors to consider producing plays by American playwrights for the first time. When the play premiered, Jewish journalists predicted that theatergoers would soon see *Desire* upon the Polish stage – and they were correct.⁵⁴⁷ One year later, in November 1929, a production of O'Neill's *Anna Christie* opened to acclaim at Teatr Nowy in Warsaw, and was falsely billed by the Polish press as "O'Neill's first play in Poland." Polish productions of *Desire Under the Elms* and *All God's Chillun Got Wings* soon followed.⁵⁴⁸ *Desire* was not the first Vilna Troupe production to indirectly introduce new repertoire to the Polish stage. Czech-Jewish playwright František Langer's 1925 drama *Periphery*, an expressionist play about a former prisoner who

⁵⁴⁶ The first well-known European production of an O'Neill play was *Anna Christie* in Berlin in 1923. Productions in Paris (*The Hairy Ape*, 1924), London (*All God's Chillun Have Wings*, 1926) and Moscow (*Desire Under the Elms* directed by Alexander Tairov, 1926) soon followed. O'Neill was also a celebrated playwright in Sweden, and his plays were frequently produced at Stockholm's Royal Dramatic Theater. O'Neill's celebrity in Sweden culminated with the famous 1956 world premiere of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* in Swedish translation. On O'Neill's European reputation, see *Eugene O'Neill's Critics: Voices from Abroad*, eds. Horst Frenz and Susan Tuck (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984).

⁵⁴⁷ "An outstanding new play by Eugene O'Neill (I am sure that Jewish theatergoers will soon be giving it a standing ovation in one of the Polish theaters!)" wrote Helena Griess in *Ewa*, a weekly magazine for Jewish women. "Święto teatru żydowskiego," *Ewa: pismo tygodniowe*, 21 October 1928, 4. Trans. Zosia Sochanska.

⁵⁴⁸ See Halina Filipowicz-Findlay, "O'Neill's Plays in Poland," *The Eugene O'Neill Newsletter* III.1 (May 1979), http://www.eoneill.com/library/newsletter/iii_1/iii-1e.htm (accessed November 18, 2012).

becomes a dancer, had been the biggest success of the Vilna Troupe's 1927-28 season under the Yiddish title *Di untermelt* [*The Underworld*]. Scarcely six months later, Warsaw's most prestigious Polish-language theater, Teatr Polski, presented the same play to critical acclaim, to the delight of the city's Jewish population who filled the theater night after night.⁵⁴⁹ The Vilna Troupe's contributions to Polish theater during the late 1920's were thus not only stylistic and scenographic. The Troupe served as a major West-East conduit for new theatrical ideas *and* new dramatic repertoire.

During the summer of 1928, Mazo reached out to former *Dybbuk* director Dovid Herman about staging a production for the Vilna Troupe that would demonstrate the company's new technical prowess before all of Warsaw. For years, the actors had dreamed of performing Y.L. Peretz's notoriously complex 1907 symbolist drama *Bay nakht afn altn mark* [*At Night in the Old Marketplace*], a nightmarish vision of the Jewish encounter with modernity. The play takes place in a Jewish marketplace over the course of a single night, and features nearly 100 distinct characters – including a wedding jester, a pair of lovers, a prostitute, musicians, wealthy Jews, impoverished pious Jews, political prisoners, a cantor, shopkeepers, a perennial wanderer, a drunkard, a bishop, a recluse, a night watchman, martyrs, a water carrier, a hanged man – each of which represents a particular Jewish type or moment in Jewish history. The dead rise up out of their graves in the cemetery and join the living in the marketplace, along with talking gargoyles, zombies, and dancing statues. Yiddish theater artists were also represented among the characters. In a metatheatrical twist, the play opens with a director, a stage manager, a narrator, and a poet rehearsing a play that is proving troublesome to stage. The set is not quite finished, the poet/playwright seems lost in his own thoughts, and the production team is behind schedule. A mysterious Wanderer steps out from behind the curtain and the director leafs frantically through

⁵⁴⁹ Griess, 4.

his notebooks trying to figure out where he figures into the play. “I can’t find him anyplace,” he mutters, perturbed.⁵⁵⁰ When the Wanderer falls asleep on stage, his dream becomes the action of the play. Over the course of the night, a dizzying cast of characters take turns expounding their philosophical observations on modern Jewish life in rhyming couplets. As they speak, characters sing and dance, they pray, they deny God’s existence, they die and rise up from the dead and then return to their graves. The Jester tries and fails to bring about the Messianic age. Political revolutions and religious reformers come and go. In the end, the Jester entreats the other characters to run to the synagogue (“Jews, / Go / to shul! Jews, go –”) as the factory whistle drowns out his voice.⁵⁵¹ The modern era has finally arrived, dissolving the dream, all of its characters, and their very ability to speak with its overpowering noise.

Bay nakht was rarely produced because of its difficulty. Even with double or triple casting, a cast of at least fifty people would be required to stage the drama as written (Herman heavily adapted the play in order to make it feasible for a cast of just twenty-three actors). The play also required an enormous and exceedingly complex set that included eight shape-shifting buildings (stable enough for actors to climb upon), a hidden catapult, giant movable tombstones, a floating cemetery that emerges in mid-air, and a remote-control-operated mechanical rooster. Peretz’s stage directions also call for ambitious lighting and sound effects: fully-operational streetlamps, a statue with blinking lights, and churchbells whose chimes rhyme with the words being spoken by various characters.⁵⁵² Many a young and ambitious Yiddish director had hoped to stage *Bay nakht* before, but these efforts had rarely made it past the planning stage. Back in

⁵⁵⁰ Y.L. Peretz, *A Night in the Old Marketplace*, trans. Hillel Halkin, in *The I.L. Peretz Reader*, ed. Ruth R. Wisse (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 371.

⁵⁵¹ Peretz, *A Night*, 431-432.

⁵⁵² Hillel Halkin has suggested that perhaps “only Broadway could do *A Night in the Old Marketplace* properly.” Hillel Halkin, “Afterword,” in *The I.L. Peretz Reader*, 439.

1921, Herman and Mazo had discussed having the Vilna Troupe produce the play as a followup to *The Dybbuk*, but the plan was quickly abandoned when they realized how difficult it would be. The idea lay dormant for several years until 1925, when the actors learned that GOSET in Moscow was staging its own adaptation of Peretz's most complex drama. GOSET's version was heavily adapted by its director, Alexander Granovsky, who transformed Peretz's abstract poetic drama into a politicized attack on Jewish religious observance and traditional *shtetl* life.⁵⁵³ But it was only after the Vilna Troupe's technically sophisticated production of *Kidush Hashem* that Mazo and Herman began to discuss resuming work on *Bay nakht* in earnest. With the advent of new lighting and design technologies, and armed with the highly-skilled design team that Weichert had assembled for *Kidush Hashem*, they decided, perhaps a full-scale production of *Bay nakht* might be possible after all.

The play's basic framing device, in which the entire action takes place within the dream of the sleeping Wanderer, made it a particularly appropriate choice for a perennially itinerant company like the Vilna Troupe. Within the drama's fragmented anti-narrative structure and amongst hundreds of personages, the Wanderer is the closest thing that *Bay nakht* has to a main character. It is he, after all, who brings the marketplace and all of its inhabitants – except for the theatrical staff – to life, and it is his dream, inspired by years on the road, which enables the Poet to write the play. As the Wanderer delivers his opening monologue, the lights gradually rise to reveal the set (in the Vilna Troupe production, an impressive series of abstract constructivist structures, designed by the Polish-Jewish painter Władysław Wajntraub).⁵⁵⁴

⁵⁵³ On the Moscow State Yiddish Theater's 1925 production of the play, see Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater*, 61-63.

⁵⁵⁴ Wajntraub's given name was Chaim Volf Vayntroyb, but he made his career under the Polish spelling of his name.

WANDERER: Where am I going to? Don't ask again.
 Maybe Someone Up There knows,
 But I myself
 Have grown old but hardly wise
 From seeing set and seeing rise
 The sun that I've been following so long.
 Nowhere a stranger and nowhere at home; [...]
 Night, let me lay my head down in your lap!
 I won't bother looking at the town – they're all the same...
 Be good and spin for me a dream
 That gently rocks my weary heart to sleep.⁵⁵⁵

The Wanderer is weary from his travels and seeks only to rest, but it is his dream – and his dream alone – that finally enables the Poet to write the play. “Hold on!” shouts the Poet with sudden inspiration. “I’ve just glimpsed one of his dreams: That’s the play we’ll put on!”⁵⁵⁶ The Poet cannot write, the Director cannot direct, and the actors and the marketplace cannot appear until the arrival of the weary traveler.

The connection that Peretz’s drama makes between travel and Jewish creativity was even more transparent in the Vilna Troupe’s production. The Wanderer’s opening monologue about travel occurred simultaneously with the revelation of the set design. The set that suddenly appeared in the Vilna Troupe production was unlike anything seen on a Polish stage before, and seemed imported directly from Meyerhold’s Russian theater: a series of platforms, boxes, and arches that allowed characters to climb, jump, scamper, and seemingly float above the stage. Here was the traveler’s dream – a technically sophisticated artistic fantasia – presented by some of the most itinerant artists in the contemporary Yiddish theater. Moreover, the Wanderer in Herman’s adaptation was no simple modern traveler, but an emblematic figure whose very appearance invoked millennia of Jewish travel and displacement. Unlike the traveler of Peretz’s

⁵⁵⁵ Peretz, *A Night*, 371-372.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 373.

original script who dressed in ordinary clothes and carried a rucksack, Herman's Wanderer wore Biblical robes and spoke in a decidedly old-fashioned manner. While the rest of the characters congregated in the marketplace, the Wanderer stood off to the side in a dimly lit corner, seeming at times to hover several inches above the stage as he stood upon one of the many platforms scattered about the set.⁵⁵⁷ As the only character that adopted pre-modern clothing and speech, the Wanderer stood out in virtually every scene, thus heightening his role as the architect of the entire play. Just as the "between two worlds" theme of *The Dybbuk* seemed particularly poignant to audiences within the context of a production that brought together an audience of unprecedented diversity, so too did *Bay nakht*'s glorification of the traveler as the engine of Jewish creativity resonate with the Vilna Troupe actors and the loyal audiences who had followed them for well over a decade.

This time, Polish intellectuals turned out in droves for opening night, intrigued by Herman's assurances that *Bay nakht* demonstrated a new level of technical sophistication never before seen in Poland. Among the prominent Polish critics at the premier was Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, the self-proclaimed *enfant terrible* of the modernist Young Poland artistic movement. In his review published in the mainstream Polish daily *Kurjer Poranny* the next day, Boy-Żeleński hailed *Bay nakht* as proving definitively that Yiddish theater was at the forefront of avant-garde theatrical innovation in Poland.

On the technical side, the Vilna Troupe ranks very high. There are various innovative solutions that are being discussed in the Polish theaters – *in the Jewish theater they have all already been introduced and they seem to have grown organically into its very fabric*. Perhaps it is its closeness to Russian theater that makes Jewish theater so progressive? The innovations are: stylized gestures, working with groups of actors on the stage, and musical and scenographic elements that are in perfect sync with the action on the stage.

⁵⁵⁷ See Nakhman Mayzel's description of the production in "Peretz Baynakht afn altn mark bay der Vilner trupe," *Literarishe bleter*, 19 October 1928, 818-820.

All of these seem to function quite organically on the Jewish stage, and – what’s more important – they do not in any way hinder the pace of the play.⁵⁵⁸

Boy-Żeleński was himself one of the architects of modernist Polish theater. In 1906, he had co-founded the famous Zielony Balonik (“Green Balloon”) cabaret where many of the writers, scenic artists, and actors who would later dominate the interwar modernist Polish stage began their careers.⁵⁵⁹ Having a figure with Boy-Żeleński’s modernist credentials describe *Bay nakht* as more forward-thinking than any other theater in Poland attracted the attention of other Polish intellectuals. Indeed, a renewed interest in the Yiddish theater was precisely what Boy-Żeleński called for in his review. “It is absolutely worth looking into Jewish theater more closely and getting oneself acquainted with it,” he instructed his readers.⁵⁶⁰ Not only was the Yiddish theater more advanced than its Polish counterparts, claimed Boy-Żeleński, but the innovations introduced by the Vilna Troupe were integrated organically and seemed remarkably natural. For Boy-Żeleński and other modernist Polish writers and critics, *Bay nakht* demonstrated Yiddish theater’s particular suitability for scenographic and stylistic experimentation.

As a non-Yiddish speaker, Boy-Żeleński’s review focused primarily on visual elements and staging rather than the delivery of the text. While Yiddish critics took Herman to task for not following Peretz’s script closely enough, Boy-Żeleński’s review offers a unique portrayal of the mood and pacing of the Vilna Troupe’s production from a spectator with no knowledge of Peretz’s original:

The poet and the jester comment on the wailing of the ghosts, and a group of small clowns jumps around the stage, mingling with the ghosts. The shadows appear out of

⁵⁵⁸ Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, “Ze sceny żydowskiej,” *Kurjer Poranny*, 24 October 1928, 7. Trans. Zosia Sochanska. My emphasis.

⁵⁵⁹ See the chapter on “Cracow: Little Green Balloons” in Harold B. Segel, *Turn-of-the-Century Cabaret* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 221-253.

⁵⁶⁰ Boy-Żeleński, 7. Trans. Zosia Sochanska.

darkness one by one, the action flows as if it was a musical phrase with continuously changing rhythm. And then suddenly something happens, something big, the tension is growing and finally the spectacle reaches the pinnacle of pathos, with the poet shouting something out in vain while the ghosts dance around him in a dream fashion, until they finally freeze to the sound of a sarcastic rant of the jester.⁵⁶¹

Boy-Żeleński described the production as akin to a musical symphony, where mood and tone are the predominant elements and narrative plays a minor role. The notion that *Bay nakht*'s highly theatrical staging and technical sophistication rendered narrative more or less irrelevant was not limited to those who did not understand Yiddish. Jewish journalist Jakób Appenszlak, writing for the Polish-language Jewish paper *Nasz Przegląd*, described Herman's contribution to the production as "inventing a theatrical composition in place of the poetic one, turning the impressionistic poetic vision into solid performance on stage."⁵⁶² As the marketplace filled with a motley array of characters with no apparent connection between them, wrote Appenszlak, the play's tenuous hold on logic dissolved and the audience was left with a series of disconnected yet emotionally evocative scenes that rendered spectators speechless.

Bay nakht had its critics as well. Those who were dissatisfied with the production were primarily Yiddish literary scholars and critics who thought that Herman's adaptation was too far removed from the original play. In *Literarische bleter*, Nakhman Mayzel criticized Herman's directorial style as too "episodic," the lighting as too dark, and the interpretation of the characters as ill suited to the nature of Peretz's original masterpiece. "Why try to 'improve' upon Peretz?" he wondered.⁵⁶³ Zalmen Zylbercweig's *Lexicon of the Yiddish Theater* also accused Herman of failing – despite his best intentions – to capture the essence of Peretz's poetic masterpiece, and

⁵⁶¹ Ibid. Trans. Zosia Sochanska.

⁵⁶² Jakób Appenszlak, "Nocą na starym rynku Peretza w wykonaniu Trupy Wileńskiej," *Nasz Przegląd*, 13 October 1928, 5. Trans. Zosia Sochanska.

⁵⁶³ Mayzel, "Peretzs *Baynakht*," 820.

suggested that perhaps *Bay nakht* simply did not belong on the stage. “It has nothing to do with theater,” wrote Zylbercweig, “The play is full of such allusions that one must study it, and a theater is not a studyhouse.”⁵⁶⁴ For these Yiddish journalists, all of whom were intimately acquainted with Peretz’s drama, *Bay nakht* was first and foremost “a book play.”⁵⁶⁵ The theater company famous for its high art dramatizations of Yiddish literary masterpieces had perhaps overreached in attempting to stage the most difficult drama that the repertoire had to offer.

Still, for many Warsaw Jews the very attempt to put on such an ambitious and unabashedly modernist drama made the production a success and in of itself. While some debated the merits of staging what was without a doubt the most bizarre and difficult play in the Yiddish dramatic canon, most Jewish intellectuals rallied behind *Bay nakht* as a national triumph. The Vilna Troupe had once again demonstrated, before an audience of prominent Jewish *and* Polish intellectuals, that the Yiddish theater had something unique to offer. Not only were the actors skilled, their movements refined, and their integration as an ensemble nearly perfect, but they had also successfully introduced the newest trends in global avant-garde theater (new modes of projection and lighting design in *Kidush Hashem*; Meyerholdian constructivist style and staging in *Bay nakht*) to the Polish stage.

The Vilna Troupe’s 1928-29 season concluded with a new Yiddish translation of *The Merchant of Venice*, retitled *Shylock*, in March 1929. Directed by Weichert, the production featured original music by Henekh Kon and a modernist set design once again by Wajntraub. The translation, commissioned especially for the Vilna Troupe’s production, scarcely changed a single line of the original. But Weichert’s direction recast the character of Shylock as the drama’s central figure. The production team used visual elements and costuming to carefully

⁵⁶⁴ Zylbercweig, 3:1966.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid.

distinguish the Jewish world from the non-Jewish world in the play. Not only was Shylock clothed in traditional Jewish garb, as was customary, but the design team also employed distinctive set pieces, costume designs, and lighting cues intended to evoke the cultural vibrancy of his Venetian ghetto.⁵⁶⁶ This production too was a major critical success for the Vilna Troupe, and played to full houses for nearly two months.

In many ways, the 1928-29 season represented the culmination of the Vilna Troupe's artistic development. With a team of skilled avant-garde directors and designers at its helm, Mazo's Vilna Troupe presented four of its most innovative productions. In review after review, critics described the Vilna Troupe's 1928-29 season as proving the legitimacy of Jewish culture as a thoroughly modern and national enterprise. "Theater is our fulcrum, our partner in the fight for Yiddish and for Yiddish culture," wrote Nakhman Mayzel at the season's close.⁵⁶⁷ To Jewish intellectuals, each successful Vilna Troupe production was a major national achievement.

After more than a decade of constant touring, Mazo hoped that the yearlong residency at the Elysium Theater would establish his Vilna Troupe as a local Warsaw institution, much in the same way that so many other Yiddish art theaters of the period (the Warsaw Yiddish Art Theater, the Moscow State Yiddish Theater, or Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater in New York) had a city that they could call home. Of course, none of these other theaters was quite as financially solvent as the members of the Vilna Troupe might have imagined: the Warsaw Yiddish Art Theater disbanded multiple times when it ran out of money, the Moscow State Yiddish Theater depended upon subsidies from the Soviet government, and Schwartz alternately took out multiple mortgages on his house, produced plays he disliked, and ultimately, gave up ownership of the

⁵⁶⁶ See Nakhman Mayzel, "Der 'Soykher fun Venedik' bay der Vilner trupe," *Literarishe bleter*, 8 March 1929, 199-200.

⁵⁶⁷ Nakhman Mayzel, "Di Vilner trupe in Varshe," *Literarishe bleter*, 30 March 1928, 270.

theater building he had built especially for his company in order to keep his Yiddish Art Theater afloat.

As a resident company in Warsaw, the Vilna Troupe suffered from the same onerous taxes that had long plagued its competitors. Warsaw's draconian theater tax system imposed special tariffs on Yiddish theaters that did not apply to Polish theater companies. While producers of Polish plays paid a 5% tax on their ticket sales, the city required a 10% tax for plays by "foreign" writers, which included all plays written in Yiddish regardless of their author's country of origin. Mazo was thus forced to pay a steep tax of 40,000 zlotys on the box office receipts for *Bay nakht*, even though Peretz was a Polish Jew who wrote the play in Warsaw.⁵⁶⁸ Meanwhile, the actors were also responsible for paying income taxes to the government that, ironically, subsidized the city's Polish-language theaters. Ineligible for state subsidies because of their language, Warsaw's Yiddish theaters were essentially on their own.⁵⁶⁹

Due to these steep taxes, the Vilna Troupe had been teetering on the edge of bankruptcy all year long, in spite of record-breaking ticket sales (*Kidush Hashem* performed to sold-out houses 130 times in the space of a single year; while *Bay nakht* had a run of 100 performances). At Mazo's request, the Jewish community organized a special committee to raise funds for the Troupe, but they struggled to find investors. The prominent Polish theater artists who frequented Vilna Troupe performances were often baffled by the perpetual economic crisis of a company that seemed on the surface to be doing so well. When Teatr Polski's director Arnold Szyfman

⁵⁶⁸ "Rekhtlozikayt un negishes fartrayben di Vilner trupe fun Varshe." *Haynt*, 10 May 1929, 10. Yiddish theaters also had to pay an additional 2.5% tax on their annual income, another tax that did not apply to the Polish-language stage.

⁵⁶⁹ Michael Steinlauf has argued that it was precisely this "permanent economic crisis" of Poland's Yiddish theaters that enabled them to be so innovative. "Precisely because of its precariousness, because it had so little to lose, this theater could occasionally devote itself to real experiments which put it in the vanguard of contemporary theater art." Steinlauf, "Polish-Jewish Theater," 263-264.

asked Mikhl Weichert why the Jewish community did not financially support its Yiddish theater, the Vilna Troupe director replied that there was a simple explanation: Jews were investing in Polish theaters instead.⁵⁷⁰ Weichert's quip was a pointed jab, for Szyfman himself was an assimilated Jew, but it was also accurate. Warsaw's Yiddish theaters were supported largely by the Jewish working class and the intellectual elite, while the middle and upper classes tended to frequent the higher-status Polish theaters. By and large, the Vilna Troupe's most passionate advocates could not afford to support it.

In May of 1929, Mazo announced – to the disappointment of the city's Jewish intellectuals – that the Vilna Troupe had no other choice but to leave Warsaw and return to the road. Between the high taxes and the lack of financial investment from Warsaw's Jewish community, the Troupe could no longer pay its mounting bills. On tour in Krakow, Lodz, Radom, Lublin, Vilna, and Bialystok, the Troupe was able to recoup its losses and continue developing new repertoire. Never again would this branch of the Vilna Troupe find another home. Ever the consummate theater manager, Mazo had seen the writing on the wall. Had the Vilna Troupe remained in Warsaw, it would not have earned enough money to survive another season. Mazo's decision to return to the road, however painful it must have been for both manager and actors, enabled the company's continued existence. It was unusual for a Yiddish theater company to last for more than a few seasons, if that. Mazo's Vilna Troupe, in contrast, performed without interruption over the course of two decades.

This, then, was the eternal dilemma of the high art Yiddish stage. To survive as a Yiddish art theater without comprising one's principles, the actors had to remain perennial wanderers. Travel was no choice – it was a necessity that was often resented by the actors, for whom settling down meant the end of their careers. Faced with the dilemma of wandering or dissolution, the

⁵⁷⁰ Steinlauf, "Polish-Jewish Theater," 311, fn. 38.

Vilna Troupe chose the road again and again. It was this embrace, however reluctant, of constant travel as an integral part of its existence that enabled Mazo's branch of the Vilna Troupe to have a longer tenure than any other Yiddish theater company in Eastern Europe.

Wandering Cosmopolitans: Transnationalism as Survival Strategy

While Mazo's Vilna Troupe was preparing to leave Warsaw, the company's long-time director Dovid Herman was in Oslo at the special invitation of the Norwegian government. In honor of the 100th anniversary of Henrik Ibsen's birth, Norway had selected four directors to stage productions for the centennial festival that best demonstrated the influence of Ibsen's work on the contemporary stage. Herman was one of four foreign directors chosen for this honor. Working with a team of translators and the skilled actors of Norway's National Theater, Herman presented *The Dybbuk* in Norwegian – a language he did not know – before a crowd of primarily non-Jewish theater artists, Ibsen scholars, monarchs, politicians, and delegates from nineteen countries.⁵⁷¹

This anecdote is a telling illustration of how the Vilna Troupe and its affiliated network of theater artists were perceived in the late 1920's. Asked to select the four most forward-thinking contemporary modern directors on the international theater scene, the Ibsen centennial committee chose Dovid Herman, *The Dybbuk*, and implicitly, the Vilna Troupe. By the late 1920's, the Vilna Troupe was widely recognized as one of the most influential "art theater" companies in the world. Initially, the Vilna Troupe's reputation was promulgated via the global reach of the company and its international network of current and former actors; soon, however,

⁵⁷¹ Chybowska, 12. The 1928 Ibsen Centennial lasted ten days, and included dozens of performances, lectures by prominent Ibsen experts from around the world, and a public exhibition of "Ibseniana." For American coverage of the festival, see T.R. Ybarra, "Norway Celebrates Ibsen Centenary," *The New York Times*, 14 March 1928, 5 and T.R. Ybarra, "All Norway Joins in Tribute to Ibsen," *The New York Times*, 16 March 1928, 1.

the company became so well known across Europe and North America that its renown extended beyond the travels of its members. Though no Vilna Troupe had ever performed in Scandinavia, Norwegian theater artists and intellectuals held the Yiddish company in extremely high regard. This was due to the Vilna Troupe's reputation for cutting-edge theatrical innovation.

Like the iconic weary Wanderer of Peretz's *Bay nakht*, the Vilna Troupe's travel, however exhausting, was also the engine of the company's continued creativity. The Troupe's reputation as a stronghold of modernist theatrical innovation was enabled by its ongoing encounters with new theatrical ideas as its members traveled. During the 1920's, the multiple theater companies that called themselves "The Vilna Troupe" traveled farther and more consistently than any Jewish theater company had ever done before. Individually, the actors longed for a home; collectively, however, the company was able to survive and continue creating groundbreaking theater art precisely because of its perpetual homelessness.

Chapter Five: The *Vilner* Legacy

“In order to embrace it all and understand what the Jewish theater meant, you know, it was a world theater. But who has the patience for it, who the hell needs it? It’s all forgotten in the past.”

— Joseph Buloff⁵⁷²

In 1936, Dovid Herman – who had just arrived in America after years of resisting offers from American Yiddish theater producers – directed a commemorative production of *The Dybbuk* in honor of the Vilna Troupe’s twentieth anniversary. This New York *Dybbuk* featured an all-star cast of the most famous Vilna Troupe performers from all branches of the company: Alexander Azro, Sonia Alomis, Paula Valter, Noah Nachbush, Sholem Tanin, Luba Kadison, Chaim Shniur, Bela Belarina, Joseph Buloff, Leah Naomi, and Leib Kadison, among others. Now in their late thirties, forties, and fifties, these actors were no longer the young firebrands whose artistic utopianism had propelled them to the forefront of the international art theater scene two decades earlier. Azro and Alomis, starring as the young lovers, were in their mid-forties; Leib and Hannah Kadison were well into their fifties; and most of the actors had children and even grandchildren of their own.

No longer could the Vilna Troupe actors be accidentally mistaken for youthful students or idealistic revolutionaries. By the mid-1930s, the *Vilner* had themselves become the Yiddish theatrical establishment. The same characteristic Vilna Troupe innovations that had shocked and delighted intellectuals in the late teens and early 1920’s – a unified “high” Yiddish stage dialect, a strictly literary repertoire, an extensive rehearsal period, productions that reflected an intimate

⁵⁷² Buloff, int. with Jack Garfein, 1980.

familiarity with European avant-garde trends of the period, a “fusion modernist” aesthetic, experimentation with avant-garde staging and design techniques, and so on – had become *de rigueur* on the high art Yiddish stage of the late 20’s and 30’s. Outside of the still-thriving *shund* theaters, which operated in their own orbit, the one-time innovations of Vilna Troupe had become the mainstream of Yiddish theater practice. This was no accident, but rather reflected how members of the Vilna Troupes had become the leaders of a vibrant Yiddish art theater movement. Indeed, it was the rare Yiddish art theater that did *not* have a *Vilner* at its helm.

The Vilna Troupe may have been well established among its peers, but by 1936, the future of Yiddish theater seemed less secure than ever. Ten years earlier, a New York production of *The Dybbuk* with this cast would have likely occasioned sold-out houses and dozens of glowing reviews in English and Yiddish. In 1936, however, these same Yiddish theater celebrities struggled to attract a meager audience to the historic revival of their most famous play. Times had changed, and the Vilna Troupe was no longer the unassailable brand that it had once been. In 1935, Mordechai Mazo’s branch of the Vilna Troupe – the longest-lasting branch of the company which had been performing for sixteen years without interruption – had finally succumbed to bankruptcy and collapsed, leaving its actors to disperse across the globe in search of new employment. In fact, the all-star cast of Herman’s New York *Dybbuk* was primarily comprised of displaced former *Vilner* from multiple branches of the company, who banded together in the face of rapidly declining prospects. The 1936 “twentieth anniversary performance” of *The Dybbuk* was thus no mere commemorative event honoring the Vilna Troupe’s record of accomplishments, as was advertised, but actually a last ditch effort to revive a Yiddish theatrical institution that had all but vanished in a bleak new economic and artistic landscape in which nearly every Yiddish theater was struggling for its survival.

Herman had also visibly aged; at sixty, he was overweight with tired eyes and a wild tangle of graying hair that refused to stay in place. His rehearsals too were no longer the legendary and grueling all-night affairs that the actors remembered from the company's early endeavors in Warsaw and Berlin. Once a notoriously stubborn director, Herman had grown increasingly disillusioned as the years went by. By the mid-1930's, a more cautious Herman had learned to compromise his high-minded ideals when necessary to pay the bills. When the combination of discriminatory government taxes, excessive building rental fees, and the flight of Warsaw's Jewish youth to the Polish-language stage made continued work in Eastern Europe nearly impossible, Herman reluctantly swallowed his disdain for the American Yiddish theater and accepted Abraham Cahan's long-standing offer to bring him to New York.⁵⁷³ But the aging director found the American Yiddish theater to be more frustrating than he had imagined. Established directors saw Herman as a formidable competitor and shunned him; younger Yiddish actors, many of whom hoped to leave Second Avenue for the bright lights of Broadway, were either disrespectful or did not even know his name; and worst of all, American Yiddish producers were unwilling to invest in his productions. Cahan was horrified. After years of trying to lure Herman to America, the *Forverts* editor was forced to acknowledge that perhaps the particular brand of high art Yiddish theater for which he had long advocated in his paper did not belong in America after all. "I believe that in America we did not judge the Vilna Troupe fairly," Cahan told readers in an editorial in advance of *The Dybbuk*'s opening. "There is no question that this group represents the best conception of the theater in the civilized world."⁵⁷⁴

But in spite of Cahan's entreaties to his vast newspaper readership, and in spite of a deft publicity campaign that featured old Vilna Troupe endorsements from the likes of George

⁵⁷³ Herman arrived in New York in August of 1933.

⁵⁷⁴ Ab. Cahan, "A por spetsiele verter vegn der Vilner trupe," *Forverts*, 19 February 1936, 3.

Bernard Shaw, Israel Zangwill, and Albert Einstein, the “twentieth anniversary” production of *The Dybbuk* was an absolute critical and financial flop.⁵⁷⁵ In sharp contrast to the Troupe’s typical dominance of the Yiddish press after a big premiere, few journalists even bothered to review this production. Those who did were uniformly underwhelmed. “Since the company dissolved six years ago,” wrote one journalist, referring to a short-lived effort to revive an American branch of the Vilna Troupe in 1930, “*its performance was not as fluid as it should be, but the virtue of the play itself emerges clearly.*”⁵⁷⁶ In 1920 and 1921, the Vilna Troupe’s dual Eastern/Western European premiere of *The Dybbuk* had dazzled Jewish intellectuals, who were amazed at how Herman and the actors had transformed a flawed drama into a modernist theatrical masterpiece. But a decade and a half later, with the play’s canonicity firmly established, it was the aging actors of the Vilna Troupe who could no longer live up to the expectations of *The Dybbuk*. The play itself was not the problem; in fact, the American public’s interest in *The Dybbuk* had not declined in the slightest. Less than three months after the Troupe’s anniversary production closed, Italian composer Lodovico Rocca’s *Dybbuk* opera opened at Carnegie Hall to glowing reviews (in which it was favorably compared to Puccini’s *Turandot*), followed by a highly publicized tour of Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Chicago, and Detroit.⁵⁷⁷ Rocca’s *Dybbuk* opera, performed in

⁵⁷⁵ Shaw was quoted as saying: “In the name of art, I wish the Vilna Troupe every success.” Israel Zangwill, the famous English playwright and author of *The Melting Pot*, was also reportedly awed by the Vilna Troupe when Azro and Alomis’ branch first came to London. “I took a very experienced English manager to see the Vilna Troupe,” Zangwill told reporters at the time, “He was as full of admiration as of envy. ‘If only I could get such actors,’ he said, ‘for the British drama.’ What cleanness of attack! What vitality! What a *Romeo and Juliet* I could get from them! They are not afraid of feeling or making the audience feel.” *The Dybbuk* program (1936), Esther Rokhl Kaminska Theatre Museum Collection, (RG 8), Box 60, Program 175267A/4298, YIVO.

⁵⁷⁶ Olin Downes, “Vilna Troupe Revived: On the 20th Anniversary of its Founding ‘Dybbuk’ is Given,” *The New York Times*, 24 February 1937, 18. My emphasis.

⁵⁷⁷ Rocca’s *Dybbuk* first premiered in Italian in Milan on May 7, 1934, then played Rome, Turin, and Warsaw before appearing in an English translation in the United States in May of 1936. Incidentally, George Gershwin had originally hoped to write a *Dybbuk* opera of his own, but upon learning that Rocca had already secured the rights to

English translation by a cast of non-Jewish singers, was worthy of Carnegie Hall and a prominent review in the *New York Times*; the Vilna Troupe's Yiddish version, in contrast, could no longer attract a large enough audience to justify even a second week of performances. The Vilna Troupe's revival of *The Dybbuk* closed after only six shows, in one of the shortest runs in the company's history. It would be the last theatrical endeavor of Dovid Herman's career. A few months later, Herman died suddenly at the age of sixty-one. He was a broken and disillusioned man in his last few months, his wife told reporters, and the cause of his death was nothing more than a broken heart.⁵⁷⁸

The 1936 *Dybbuk* revival was also the Vilna Troupe's swan song. After the failure of this production and Herman's death, the company that had dominated the Yiddish theater for two decades was effectively retired – save for occasional solo performances by aging Vilna Troupe actors seeking to relive their glory days. Never again would another group of actors call themselves “the Vilna Troupe,” never again would theatergoers quarrel about which branch was more authentic than the rest. For years, the actors had relied upon a vast network of Vilna Troupe companies and affiliates to help them secure steady employment as they traveled around the world. But with the dissolution of the last Vilna Troupe and the decline of the Yiddish art theater movement more generally, actors who had long relied upon their *Vilner* affiliation to further their careers had to find new ways of making a living. Some actors crossed over to the English-

an operatic version, Gershwin abandoned this plan and began instead to write *Porgy and Bess*. The original librettist for Rocca's *Dybbuk* was Renato Simoni, who had been an assistant librettist for *Turandot*; the librettist for the English translation was Archie Coates. Rocca was inspired to write a *Dybbuk* opera after seeing the Vilna Troupe perform the play in the 1920s. Not all of the reviews of the Carnegie Hall performance were positive: the *New York Times* was particularly ambivalent about the opera, and was especially critical of the tenor who played Khonen. Other American journalists, however, were smitten with the opera. On Rocca's *Dybbuk*, see “New York ‘Dybbuk’ Premiere,” *The New York Times*, 10 May 1936, X5. On Gershwin's planned *Dybbuk* opera, see Cecil Bloom, “The Dybbuk and George Gershwin,” *Midstream* 54.5 (September-October 2008), 20-22 and Howard Pollack, *George Gershwin: His Life and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006): 451-464.

⁵⁷⁸ Chybowska, 12.

language stage – most famously Joseph Buloff, who developed a successful career on Broadway in the 1940’s and in Hollywood in the 1950’s. Others tried to reinvent themselves by forming new Yiddish theater companies, which rarely lasted for long. Still others left the theater altogether, like Vilna Troupe co-founder Alexander Azro, who resigned himself to working as a watch repairman after a short-lived and frustrating attempt at a career on the English-language stage.⁵⁷⁹

It was fitting, critics agreed, that the Vilna Troupe’s last stand happened in America. After all, it was in New York that the Vilna Troupe had faced its first significant failure back in 1924. Yiddish writers compared the European rise and American fall of the Vilna Troupe to the Hebrew-language company Habima’s similar struggle to attain success in the United States. “The achievements of both companies grew more and more popular and prestigious each new country they visited,” concluded one journalist, “Until they came here, to America [...] America ruined them both.”⁵⁸⁰

The Vilna Troupe brand name had once conveyed an aura of near invincibility upon any actor or company who could document their connection to the legendary group. The failure of Herman’s final *Dybbuk* production, however, suggested a markedly different atmosphere in which the Vilna Troupe name instead evoked aging, outmoded actors confronting dwindling audiences. Against the backdrop of a massive explosion of Jewish literary and cultural creativity during the interwar period, “Vilna” and its signature theater company had signified youth, idealism, and a bright future for a Yiddish culture that was, at long last, gaining recognition from

⁵⁷⁹ Azro had a brief spot of success on Broadway in Allen Boretz and John Murray’s play *Room Service*, which ran for over a year before the Marx Brothers adapted it into a film of the same title. In both, Azro played the supporting role of Sasha Smirnoff, a Russian immigrant waiter and aspiring Broadway actor who constantly bores the others with tales of his glory days performing in *Uncle Vanya* with the Moscow Art Theater. Ironically, this would be his first – and last – success on the English-language stage.

⁵⁸⁰ B. Ts. Goldberg, “In gang fun tog: di Vilner.” 22 February 1937. Esther Rokhl Kaminska Collection (RG 8), Box 60, YIVO.

the outside world. By the mid-1930's, however, Yiddish and youth culture were no longer seen as synonymous. With the exception of South America and Australia, where Yiddish culture continued to thrive well into the 1960's, Yiddish theater in much of the Jewish world was decidedly in decline by the mid-1930's. For the most part, young Jewish actors who might once have dreamed of running away with the Vilna Troupe no longer sought to enter the Yiddish theater. In Warsaw, the experimental Polish-language stage beckoned. In New York, young Jewish intellectuals with a theatrical bent dreamed of finding their "true art" in companies like the Group Theater, which was largely populated by first-generation American Jews who grew up attending the Yiddish theater with their parents.⁵⁸¹ Two of the Group Theater's founders, Harold Clurman and Lee (né Israel) Strasberg, grew up in Yiddish-speaking homes where they first encountered the stage in Yiddish. Had they been born just a decade earlier, these two visionaries might just as likely have started a *Yiddish*-language experimental theater, perhaps even one that was modeled after the Vilna Troupe, which was Clurman's favorite Yiddish theater company. But by the time that Clurman, Strasberg, and Cheryl Crawford founded the Group Theater in 1931, the audience for Yiddish theater had already begun to age. Young Jewish actors sought to emulate new idols like Paul Muni, who had left the Yiddish theater behind – along with his given name, Meshulem Vayzenfreund – only to find fame and wealth in Hollywood. Of all the Yiddish theater companies, none were more affected by this talent drain than the Yiddish art theaters. An organization like the Vilna Troupe required a steady influx of idealistic young actors and spectators in order to continue the constant geographical expansion that had brought it acclaim. The decline of youth interest in the Yiddish theater during the 1930's was thus catastrophic for

⁵⁸¹ Eleven of the Group Theater's members were first-generation American Jews: Clurman, Strasberg, Stella Adler, John Garfield, Howard Da Silva, John Randolph, Clifford Odets, Morris Carnovsky, Sanford Meisner, Anna Sokolow, and Lee J. Cobb. Stella Adler's daughter called the Group Theater "the next generation of actors after Yiddish theater and vaudeville." Quoted in Stewart F. Lane, *Jews on Broadway: A Historical Survey of Performers, Playwrights, Composers, Lyricists, and Producers* (New York: McFarland: 2011), 73.

the company, and more broadly, for the Yiddish art theater movement at large. The disintegration of the last branch of the Vilna Troupe on the twentieth anniversary of its founding was hardly surprising to anyone who had been following the Troupe's gradual slide from international sensation to yesterday's news. That the end of the Vilna Troupe elicited so little comment was merely symptomatic of the brand's overall depreciation.

But this chapter is not about the decline of the Vilna Troupe. Nor is it about the almost unilaterally depressing fates of the *Vilner*: the actors who struggled to reinvent themselves in middle age as their careers became obsolete; or worse still, the outright murder of so many former Vilna Troupe members during the Holocaust, among them Isaac Sheftel and Mordechai Mazo, who perished during the April 1943 Warsaw Ghetto uprising while fighting for the resistance; the untimely end of Alexander Shtayn, who died in a Soviet prison; or the brutal conditions that killed Miriam Orleska, Khone Broz, and Shloyme Kon, all of whom died in Treblinka. The Vilna Troupe's fame provided no protection against the Final Solution.

In the 1930's, the Vilna Troupe was subject to the same fate as virtually every other Yiddish theater of the period: the gradual transfer of its youth audience to the non-Jewish theaters; linguistic assimilation; the diminishing reputation of Yiddish in major Jewish centers; the growing political and cultural leverage of a modern Hebrew culture that vigorously suppressed its Eastern European roots; the aging of the young idealists whose energy and vision had once fueled a global movement; the specter of rising anti-Semitism across Europe, the Soviet Union, and the United States; and the financial pressure of a Depression which stretched the already paper-thin budgets of the interwar Yiddish theaters and their core audiences beyond any hope of viability.

The decline of Yiddish language and culture in the 1930's is a story that has become all too familiar – so much so that we tend to ascribe a false sense of inevitability to Jewish life during these years.⁵⁸² From the perspective of the twenty-first century reader who is well aware that Yiddish-language theater is no longer a salient presence on the contemporary stage, the notion that Yiddish theater culture would collapse in the years preceding the Holocaust can easily seem self-evident.

As Michael André Bernstein has argued, the natural inclination when writing about a historical catastrophe is to engage in “backshadowing” – a kind of “retroactive foreshadowing” that imposes a twin sense of linearity and inevitability on the past. By engaging with the past through the biased lens of the writer’s knowledge of the present, historical figures are unfairly deprived of agency and become mere caricatures of themselves – victims-in-waiting, in Bernstein’s terms – who are judged “as though they too should have known what was to come.”⁵⁸³ The greater the catastrophe, the stronger the pull for writers and historians to backshadow; it is no accident, then, that Bernstein’s primary examples are drawn from histories of pre-Holocaust Eastern European Jewry. Similarly, historical accounts of Yiddish theatrical activity in the 1930's also tend to be dominated by motifs of imminent catastrophe. The introduction to Itzik Manger, Yonas Turkow, and Moyshe Perenson’s seminal two-volume collection *Yidisher teater in Eyrope* [*Yiddish Theater in Europe*] begins with Manger’s line: “With a heavy heart, I write the introduction to this book [...] Yiddish theater was the youngest

⁵⁸² As Nahma Sandrow writes in *Vagabond Stars*, most Yiddish actors in Poland spent the late 1930's planning for future seasons, not preparing for the end. In 1938, the Polish actors' union published a detailed agenda for their next annual meeting; in 1939, Gimpel's Garden Theater in Lemberg opened a beautiful new building that no Yiddish actor would ever have the chance to use. Sandrow, 335.

⁵⁸³ Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 16. See also Bernstein “Victims-in-Waiting: Backshadowing and the Representation of European Jewry,” *New Literary History* 29.4 (Autumn 1998): 625-651.

theater in the world, and it was exterminated.”⁵⁸⁴ Like Bernstein’s “backshadowed” studies of Eastern European Jewry, a history of the Yiddish theater that begins with the moment of its destruction pre-emptively positions its subjects as doomed. The Yiddish artists of the 1930’s may have worried about their future, but they were by no means convinced that the entire Yiddish theater was coming to an end.

Thus rather than focusing on the Vilna Troupe’s precarious existence and ultimate collapse during the 1930’s, this chapter examines this period of the company’s history through the lens of its *legacy*. In doing so, I am contributing to a broader effort among scholars of twentieth century Jewish culture to resist overemphasizing the period of destruction.⁵⁸⁵ Tracing the Vilna Troupe’s decline offers little of interest to the theater historian; far more intriguing is how the Troupe’s activities continued to resonate long after its official collapse. By thus reconsidering the Vilna Troupe’s “decline” in terms of the company’s long-term impact, we can see that the so-called “end” of the Vilna Troupe was in fact no stopping point at all, but rather, the beginning of the company’s next era.

In fact, the 1930’s simultaneously marked the diminishing of the Vilna Troupe’s influence *and* the large-scale adoption of the company’s distinctive ideological and artistic program by other theater companies. Even as various incarnations of the Vilna Troupe arose and disintegrated in rapid succession, a tightly interconnected network of former *Vilner* artists was actively expanding the Yiddish art theater movement. Beginning in the 1920’s and continuing throughout the 1930’s, 40’s, and 50’s, those who had once performed with the Vilna Troupe

⁵⁸⁴ Itzik Manger, “Araynfir-vort,” in *Yidisher teater in Eyrope tsvishn beyde velt milkhomes: Poyln*, 7-19. Since Yiddish theater historiography only came of age in the immediate postwar period, such backshadowing was particularly common among seminal Yiddish theater historians, many of whom had only barely survived the Holocaust themselves. More often than not, histories of the Yiddish theater tend to begin with the author’s personal reflections on its destruction.

⁵⁸⁵ See David Shneer’s discussion of backshadowing in *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture: 1918-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2-4.

became seminal figures in a range of other Yiddish theatrical endeavors around the world. In Poland, former *Vilner* were at the helm of the Warsaw Yiddish Art Theater (VYKT), Yung Teater, the Ida Kaminska Theater, the Studio of the Yiddish Drama School, the New Yiddish Theater, Azazel, Ararat, Khad Gadyo, and Teater far yugnt. In Latvia, a core group of Vilna Troupe affiliates founded the Nayer idisher teater. In the United States, *Vilner* performed in the Jewish Art Theater, Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater, the Folksbiene, and the Chicago Dramatishe Gezelshaft. In South Africa, a husband-and-wife team of Vilna Troupe actors took on the directorship of the Johannesburg Folk Theater in the 1950's; in Mexico City, Vilna Troupe co-founders Alexander Azro and Sonia Alomis ran an influential Yiddish drama school; in Australia, former Vilna Troupe affiliates were among the founding members of the Kadimah Art Theater and its long-lived successor, the Dovid Herman Theatre, both in Melbourne; in Argentina, Theater for Two and the Argentinean Yiddish Folk Theater (IFT) were both developed by one-time *Vilner*. Still others left the Yiddish theater together in order to pursue careers in non-Jewish theater and film, where they collaborated with a diverse array of influential performers from Polish avant-garde director Leon Schiller to American film and television icon Lucille Ball. Paradoxically, it was only with the disintegration of the Vilna Troupe and the subsequent dispersal of its actors into other theatrical endeavors that the full measure of the company's impact became apparent. As Vilna Troupe actors left the company for brighter horizons, they brought their *Vilner* training to new colleagues and audiences around the world.

In the archives of Vilna Troupe co-founder Alexander Azro at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, buried beneath hundreds of letters, theater programs, and various theatrical ephemera, there is a pile of worn handwritten notes marked "Plan for the History of the Vilna

Troupe” – a book that Azro hoped to write but never actually penned. Still, these notes provide valuable insight into how the members of the Vilna Troupe thought about their company. For example, Azro’s notes included the following chapter outline:

- Influence of Hirschbein on the *Vilner*
- National sentiments
- Russian Empire
- The times
- Foundations of the Troupe
- Instead of the horses is us
- No money, hunger. We put up our own posters.
- What is this Yiddish?
- First exam
- Success
- Kovne
- Grodne
- Warsaw
- Lodz tour
- Influence – disappearance of shund
- Berlin
- Leipzig
- Holland
- Antwerp
- Paris
- London
- America⁵⁸⁶

For Azro, *geography* was the primary organizing principle for representing the scope of the Vilna Troupe’s achievements. After a few preliminary chapters covering the company’s emergence during the First World War, Azro would have structured his history around a chronological list of the various locales where the company performed. For Azro, the best way to demonstrate the success of the Vilna Troupe was in terms of its global presence. Indeed, as Azro told readers in an essay published towards the end of his life, the Vilna Troupe’s primary ambition was always to become a *world theater* – which the actors understood to mean both a

⁵⁸⁶ Alexander Azro, “Plan tsu der geshikhte fun der Vilner trupe.” Azro and Alomis Papers (RG 729), Box 1, Folder 4, YIVO. Original emphasis.

theater that could be equally successful in a variety of locales *and* one that was regarded as one of the best theaters in the world.

The reputation of the Vilna Troupe, its artistic flowering, carried quick as lighting across the entire world. Its influence was wide and spread across many countries. The Vilna Troupe was the stimulus and model for a whole host of serious Yiddish theaters and theater studios [...] in different countries. [...] In artistic garb, through the succulent [*zaftik*] Yiddish language, the Vilna Troupe revealed, before the Jewish community and before the world, the treasures of Yiddish literature and Yiddish culture.⁵⁸⁷

For Azro and the other *Vilner*, the company's record of traveling performances was proof positive of its success. Calling themselves a "world theater" thus signified precisely what the Vilna Troupe was and what it had achieved.

Writing these reflections in the 1960's, Azro had to admit that the Vilna Troupe to which he had dedicated his life had been largely forgotten. Still, he remained convinced that history would someday vindicate his company as an important artistic institution with a lasting impact on the modern theater at large.

The Vilna Troupe was dissolved, but its *soul*, its spirit, lives and will continue to live. *It will awaken and demand its due*. For the Vilna Troupe was no mere episode, no mere flash in the history of Yiddish theater, but the beginning of a new epoch, a new era.⁵⁸⁸

With any luck, Azro concluded, future historians would someday "with reverence and love, restore the Golden Era of the Vilna Troupe," returning its "soul" to the pages of theater history where it belongs, just like Khonen's soul refuses to be parted from his destined bride in that most famous Vilna Troupe play, *The Dybbuk*.⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁷ Azro, "Der onheyb," 27.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid, 34.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid.

What would the history of the twentieth century stage look like if we took up Azro's challenge and placed the Vilna Troupe at its center? The notion that the Vilna Troupe artists were a primary nucleus of theatrical creativity during the modern period is perhaps an exaggeration, but what kinds of artistic connections and nuances might this sort of historical reframing reveal?

Until now, I have primarily approached the history of the Vilna Troupe chronologically, as a linear progression of stylistic and structural developments, each occurring within a particular historical context. But this approach has its limitations when considering a multifaceted phenomenon like the Vilna Troupe, which thrived upon seeming to be everywhere and everyone all at once. A strictly linear methodology provides only a limited perspective on the Vilna Troupe that can neither account for the company's complexity – its global geographical presence, its networks of affiliated theater artists, the constant shuffling of actor affiliations between constituent branches – nor its long-term impact.

This chapter thus introduces two new methodologies that expand upon the linear analysis of the previous chapters. After a brief examination of the causes of the Troupe's organizational decline during the 1930's, I turn to a "metahistory" of the company that draws upon network theory and data visualization to demonstrate how the Troupe disseminated theatrical ideas and repertoire across geographical borders. This type of macroscopic analysis is necessary in order to understand how the Vilna Troupe was connected to other groups. Yet this approach also has its limitations, for it cannot account for the idiosyncratic experiences of the hundreds of individual theater artists involved with the Vilna Troupe. Indeed, more so than any one company or branch, it was the *personal* career paths of individual *Vilner* that brought the Troupe's ideas into contact with other theater practitioners around the world. I thus end with a brief microhistorical account

that examines the Vilna Troupe through a single family of its artists. Taken together, these two approaches – network-based metahistory and individual-based microhistory – enable a fuller accounting of the Vilna Troupe’s legacy.

PART ONE: THE END OF THE VILNA TROUPE

At the beginning of the 1930’s, the Vilna Troupe was larger and more famous than ever before. Even after the dissolution of Azro and Alomis’ company in 1925, the number of Vilna Troupe branches and affiliated actors only continued to expand. By the early 1930’s, what had begun as a single company of fifteen actors had ballooned into seven Vilna Troupes employing hundreds of Yiddish theater artists across five continents. Initially a revolutionary organization that sought to turn the entire Yiddish theater upon its head, by the 1930’s the Vilna Troupe had so thoroughly succeeded in its insurrection that it had itself become the Yiddish theatrical establishment.

But the dawn of a new decade brought fresh challenges that threatened to undermine all that the Vilna Troupe had achieved. Yiddish theater, handicapped by the extreme political and economic instability that characterized Jewish life throughout the interwar period, had never been able to promise its artists steady employment, let alone living wages or adequate performance venues. Virtually the only thing that Jewish actors could reliably count upon in the 1920’s was an eager audience. By the 1930’s, however, it had become increasingly clear that the audience for high art Yiddish theater – and indeed, for any Yiddish-language theater at all – was disappearing. The Vilna Troupe’s core audience base had aged along with the actors; no longer in their teens and twenties, they now had adult obligations and responsibilities of their own. Theatergoers who had once run away with the Vilna Troupe decades earlier were now in their

forties and fifties with families and different dreams. A middle-aged fan base meant that hordes of admirers no longer followed the Vilna Troupe actors as they traveled from place to place. More troubling, Jewish youth who were coming of age in the 1930's had never quite taken to the Vilna Troupe like their parents' generation. Indeed, many no longer went to the Yiddish theater at all, preferring instead to frequent the non-Jewish stage. In New York, the reigning world capital of Yiddish theater, companies that had been successful just a few years earlier were closing down one after another. In the first few months of 1930 alone, the manager of the National Theater committed suicide after his company went defunct, the Public Theater was bought out by a talking picture conglomerate, ticket sales for Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater were so low that the company was forced to end its season several months prematurely, and two minor Yiddish theaters, the Liberty Theater in Brooklyn and the McKinley Square Theater in the Bronx, shut down permanently.⁵⁹⁰ This was largely a consequence of the new immigration legislation enacted in 1924, which severely inhibited the ability of Eastern European Jews to migrate to the United States and cut the American Yiddish theaters off from an influx of new Yiddish-speaking spectators. Without these immigrants, there were simply no longer enough Yiddish theatergoers to support thirteen professional companies in New York. The Vilna Troupe's vision of a Yiddish theater that would function as the central cultural institution in modern Jewish life no longer carried quite the same resonance in era of rapid cultural and linguistic assimilation.

For the Vilna Troupe actors, the early 1930's was thus a period of steadily increasing anxiety, juxtaposed with isolated moments of hopeful exhilaration when new companies were founded, and inevitably followed with crushing disappointment as troupe after troupe collapsed.

⁵⁹⁰ William Schack, "The Yiddish Theatre in Travail," *The New York Times*, 30 March 1930, X2. According to Schack, union demands and high personnel costs were just as much to blame for the crisis as declining ticket sales.

Actor Joseph Buloff's description of the Vilna Troupe's precarious position in a 1929 letter to a friend typifies the fluctuating emotions of the *Vilner* during this period:

The Vilner are cursed by God, like the Eternal Jew. May they live forever, as he does. They were drowned so many times, but each time the water rejected them. They were burned again and again, and did not go up in smoke. So often it looked as if they already had departed for the next world, but when a testing feather brushed against their nose, they sneezed and lived again. Long life to them! The Vilna Troupe is like the legendary snake. Cut it to pieces and each piece gets a life of its own. In spite of the world, in spite of itself.⁵⁹¹

Buloff's likening of the Vilna Troupe to the fabled snake that can regenerate and multiply after being cut into pieces reflects the twin sense of optimism and despair experienced by the *Vilner* in the 1930's. On the one hand, the newer branches of the Troupe and the other Yiddish art theater companies founded by Vilna Troupe affiliates lacked the staying power of their predecessors. By the 1930's, many of these actors had been wandering for decades and desperately sought stability; as such, the increasingly rapid rate at which Yiddish theater companies came and went was alarming. The creation of each new Yiddish theater company dangled the tantalizing promise of geographical permanence, which was an attractive prospect indeed for the long-itinerant *Vilner*. But this dream of a permanent company receded into the distance as one company after another dissolved, sending their actors back on the road once more.

And yet, in spite of these significant challenges, the Vilna Troupe continued to survive even as other Yiddish theater companies succumbed to the pressures of the period. By 1930, the Troupe had been performing, in one way or another, for fifteen years. This alone was a major triumph, for no other Yiddish theater company could claim such a feat. Over the years, the Vilna Troupe had survived much worse than a declining audience base: starvation, typhoid, expulsion, anti-Semitic protests, bankruptcy, internal conflict. Perhaps, as Buloff suggested to his colleague,

⁵⁹¹ Buloff, Kadison, and Genn, 87.

the Vilna Troupe was condemned to wander the earth forever like the Wandering Jew of Christian lore, simultaneously blessed with eternal life and cursed with permanent itinerancy.

The case of the Bronx Vilna Troupe, a short-lived attempt by several members of the original company to revive the company on American soil, demonstrates the new challenges that would-be Vilna Troupe founders encountered at the dawn of the 1930's. In 1929, a group of *Vilner* actors who had worked in a variety of companies – including original Vilna Troupe founder Leib Kadison, his wife Hannah, his daughter Luba and son-in-law Joseph Buloff, along with Noah Nachbush, Leah Naomi, Shmuel Tanin, Reuven Vendorf, a few other seasoned veterans, and several new talents – decided to open a new branch of the company in the heart of the Bronx. The location was, in part, an attempt to distance themselves from the crowded Yiddish theater scene on Second Avenue; but equally significant was the new company's lack of start up capital. Vilna Troupe actors who, just a few years earlier, had been in high demand now found themselves unemployed for long stretches. Meanwhile, the same American Yiddish theater producers who had fought over the Vilna Troupe less than a decade earlier were saddled with their own financial difficulties, for the declining audience for Yiddish theater was their problem as well. Leasing a grand theater on Second Avenue was simply not an option when the Vilna Troupe actors could barely scrape together enough money to rent an outdated turn-of-the-century vaudeville venue on 149th Street. The theater's inconvenient distance from the Yiddish-speaking Jewish communities of the Lower East Side was a significant concern, but the actors had few options on such a limited budget.

Location was only the beginning of the Bronx Vilna Troupe's troubles. After paying rent to their new landlord, the company could not afford to hire stagehands at the salary required by union regulations. Instead, the actors imported non-unionized amateur stagehands from Chicago

who were willing to work for a pittance.⁵⁹² Infuriated, the powerful Yiddish stagehands' union staged large protests outside of the theater and set off stink bombs during the performances.⁵⁹³ The actors tried to ignore these disturbances as much as possible, throwing open the stage doors to ventilate the theater while continuing to perform as if nothing had happened, but most spectators were less willing to withstand the picket lines and the stench.⁵⁹⁴

The Bronx Vilna Troupe's first production – a new translation of Czech playwright František Langer's suburban murder drama *Periphery*, which had had a successful Broadway run under Max Reinhardt's direction just a few months earlier – opened on November 1, 1929; three more productions and scarcely four months later, the company had folded for good.⁵⁹⁵ There was simply no audience, save for a rapidly dwindling group of long-time Vilna Troupe fans who, try as they might, could not convince others to attend. The fact that the America Theater was an extremely large house only made the paucity of the Vilna Troupe's ticket sales more apparent. "A long journey to the Bronx through the seven halls of hell, and after that long march is nothing more than a large, empty, cold, uncomfortable theater where after all that, you sit among a thousand empty seats, which glare at you with their emptiness," critic Alexander Mukdoyni told

⁵⁹² Yiddish theater, particularly in the United States, had a long tradition of unionization. The powerful Hebrew Actors' Union – the first of its kind in America – was founded in 1899. By the 1920's, there were strong unions for Yiddish theater designers, directors, stagehands, and musicians. See Edna Nahshon, "Stars, Strikes, and the Yiddish Stage: The Story of the Hebrew Actors' Union" (exhibition catalog), New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 2009.

⁵⁹³ Luba Kadison, int. by Louise Cleveland, 1980.

⁵⁹⁴ Buloff, Kadison, and Genn, 93.

⁵⁹⁵ The Bronx Vilna Troupe ultimately presented four plays: *Periphery* (prem. November 1, 1929), Alter Kacyzne's *Ger tsedek* [*The Righteous Convert*] (prem. December 10, 1929), a translation of a comedy by German-Jewish playwright Ludwig Fulda, retitled *Alte bokherim* [*Old friends*] (prem. January 31, 1930), and finally, the revue *Der regnboygn* [*The Rainbow*], (prem. February 28, 1930). All four productions were directed by Joseph Buloff.

readers.⁵⁹⁶ An empty seat in a theater, Mukdoyni continued, is like having a hole in your clothes. The rest of the cloth might be whole, but the missing piece ruins the entire outfit. The situation only grew worse with time as even the most loyal Vilna Troupe fans grew weary of the long trek to the Bronx, the stink bombs, and the picket lines, and stopped coming altogether. A thousand unsold tickets on *Periphery*'s opening night soon became 1500 or more empty seats at every show. Mukdoyni tried to put a positive spin on the situation, hailing the actors for their "bravery" for continuing to stage quality theater in spite of the unsold tickets. "What a tremendous artistic effort is required to be able to perform before a thousand empty seats!" Mukdoyni extolled. "This is the only theater that has, in this dark season, created something new; the only theater that has not been demoralized by the poverty and despair [of today's Yiddish theater], but quite the opposite – the poverty and despair have actually enhanced their theater."⁵⁹⁷ These sentiments, however, did little to raise the morale of the Bronx Vilna Troupe actors, who grew increasingly despondent as the weeks wore on and their audience failed to materialize. Yiddish journalists like Mukdoyni may have succeeded in making some readers feel guilty about abandoning the Vilna Troupe, but such entreaties were less successful in convincing theatergoers to venture out to 149th Street.

Thus it was that only two weeks into *Periphery*'s run, the Bronx Vilna Troupe was already facing financial ruin. The actors pleaded with prominent Yiddish writers to urge readers to come to the Bronx and save the Vilna Troupe before it was too late. In one such appeal, Yiddish poet Aaron Glants-Leyeles railed against the American Jewish community for failing to adequately fund the Vilna Troupe. That the Vilna Troupe languished in poverty in the Bronx was

⁵⁹⁶ A. Mukdoyni, "In oremkayt." Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Scrapbook 2, 109-110, Harvard Judaica Division.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid.

an absolute travesty, Leyeles told readers, and it was the duty of Jewish theatergoers everywhere to “help the *Vilner* – and yourselves – to create an authentic Jewish artistic stage.”⁵⁹⁸ These efforts were also unsuccessful in attracting new spectators, and the actors grew accustomed to playing to thousands of empty seats, night after night.

By the time the Bronx Vilna Troupe opened its third production, a Yiddish translation of a contemporary German comedy by Ludwig Fulda, even the Vilna Troupe’s most loyal defenders could only conclude that the actors were trying to “drown their sorrows in comedy.”⁵⁹⁹ But the lighthearted spirit of the play was ill suited to the production’s austere setting and the desperation of its actors. The jokes fell flat, the jovial tone seemed forced, and the overall demeanor of the actors seemed altogether more appropriate for tragedy than for comedy. “The Vilna Troupe artists [...] make a serious attempt to bring the necessary levity into their playing [...] but it is not successful in the slightest,” criticized one influential Yiddish journalist who had nearly always sung the Vilna Troupe’s praises in the past.⁶⁰⁰ Reviewers also expressed concern about the Bronx Vilna Troupe’s choice of repertoire, which drew equally from European and Yiddish drama. To be fair, this merging of European and Jewish repertoire had been an integral element of the Vilna Troupe’s approach since the inception of the original company. The Bronx company’s repertoire was nothing more than a continuation of standard Vilna Troupe practice. But in the highly-charged political atmosphere of the 1930’s, when the architects of modern Yiddish culture feared that assimilation into the non-Jewish mainstream threatened all that they had created, the Bronx Vilna Troupe’s incorporation of European repertoire was more problematic. Just as Jews had a responsibility to support the Vilna Troupe, critics argued, the

⁵⁹⁸ A. Leyeles, “Arum teater: ‘Mord’ bay di Vilner in Amerike teater,” *Di vokh*, 15 November 1929, 19.

⁵⁹⁹ William Edlin, “Di Vilner trupe in ‘alte bokherim’ in Amerike teater,” *Der tog*, 7 February 1930.

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

Vilna Troupe also had a responsibility to support Jewish playwrights by exclusively producing their work.

Perhaps influenced by these criticisms, the Bronx Vilna Troupe chose for its fourth and final production an original musical revue that wove together traditional Yiddish folksongs with improvised scenes drawn from Jewish folklore. *Der regnboygn* [*The Rainbow*] received excellent reviews in the Yiddish press, and the small audiences that gathered at the America Theater were enthusiastic. But there were still 1500 or more empty seats in the theater, night after night. After only a few performances of *Der regnboygn*, the Bronx Vilna Troupe finally accepted defeat. Once again, the actors said their goodbyes and dispersed to other Yiddish theater companies around the world: several to Buenos Aires, where the audience for Yiddish theater was just as vibrant as ever, others to Paris and London, and some back to Second Avenue. The legendary Vilna Troupe actor Noah Nachbush, who once originated the role of the Messenger in *The Dybbuk*, opted to quit the professional Yiddish theater altogether. For the rest of his life, Nachbush would travel on his own giving dramatic readings and solo recitals of material from the Vilna Troupe's repertoire in venues around the world; first in small theaters and auditoriums in the United States; later, in refugee centers and D.P. camps across Europe during and after the war; and finally, as those who fondly remembered the Vilna Troupe continued to age, in senior centers and retirement homes.⁶⁰¹

Meanwhile, other branches of the Vilna Troupe were hardly faring any better. For thirteen years, Mazo's Vilna Troupe had been largely insulated from the difficulties faced by

⁶⁰¹ Even before the onset of the war, it was not unusual for members of the Vilna Troupe to be invited to perform before German and Polish Jews as a morale-booster. For example, when the Nazis expelled Polish Jews residing in Germany to the Zbąszyń refugee camp in 1938, one of Emanuel Ringelblum's first actions as organizer of the camp was to invite Vilna Troupe actor Noah Nachbush to journey from New York and perform for the refugees. See Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History: Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 101-102.

other branches simply because the company had never performed west of Vienna. By remaining almost exclusively in Eastern Europe while its counterparts traveled widely, Mazo's Troupe had benefitted from the brand's expanding global reputation while remaining safely ensconced within the most densely populated Yiddish-speaking territory in the world. But just as young American Jews were increasingly choosing to attend the English-language theaters of their peers rather than the Yiddish-language theaters of their parents, linguistic assimilation was also rampant among Polish-Jewish youth during the 1930's. By the end of the decade, Yiddish theater artists in Poland had become so concerned about the future of their art form that many turned to developing professional Yiddish children's theaters in hopes of building a new generation of Jewish theatergoers. Characteristically, former Vilna Troupe members were at the forefront of these efforts, including the founding of the most successful Yiddish children's theater of the period: Teater far yugnt (Theater for Youth) under the direction of *Vilner* affiliate Clara Segalovitch.

The audience for Yiddish theater may have been dwindling in Poland but, as Mordechai Mazo reminded his actors, the *other* Vilna Troupes had always managed to find enthusiastic non-Jewish audiences when they toured Western Europe. And so in October 1933, Mazo's Vilna Troupe set off on its first Western European tour. "The First World Tour of the Vilna Troupe!" proclaimed the company's programs in bold type, with the subtly corrective subheading "under the direction of M. Mazo" in small print beneath it.⁶⁰² They began in Paris, then traveled in quick succession to Strasbourg, Antwerp, Brussels, Holland, Switzerland, and London over the next few months, performing only their biggest hits: *The Dybbuk*, *At Night in the Old Marketplace*,

⁶⁰² "Première Tournée Mondiale du Théâtre Artistique Juif 'Trupa Wilenska' sur la direction de M. Mazo," 1933. Judaica Ephemera Collection, Theater Series B, Collection 3, Box 16292: Netherlands, Belgium, France Folder, Harvard Judaica Division.

Kidush Hashem, *200,000*, and a new Yiddish translation of Sergei Tretyakov's anti-imperialist political drama *Roar, China!* that had recently done well in Warsaw.

The tour was not without its triumphs. The Queen of Belgium attended *Kidush Hashem* in Brussels and personally congratulated Mazo and the actors backstage after the performance; this visit, as was widely reported in the press, was intended as a public demonstration of Belgian solidarity with Europe's Jews in the face of rising German anti-Semitism.⁶⁰³ In London, several members of Parliament attended the Vilna Troupe's opening production of *200,000*; the Troupe's subsequent London programs featured a running list of every prominent personage who had attended in hopes of attracting more. Mazo's Vilna Troupe even garnered a few positive reviews in major European papers, and local Jewish communities across Western Europe were overjoyed to have the famous *Vilner* once again in their midst.

But overall, the company's 1933 "world tour" proved far less successful than the actors had hoped. The non-Yiddish-speaking Western Europeans who had flocked to see Azro and Alomis' *Dybbuk* a decade earlier were no longer quite so eager to attend Yiddish theater, and ticket sales were significantly slower than Mazo and his colleagues had anticipated. To make matters worse, the few reviews that the company did receive were mixed, at best, and journalists frequently chided the company's work as having low production value.⁶⁰⁴ Midway through the tour, Mazo made drastic changes to the Troupe's playbills and publicity materials, translating everything into French, Belgian, and English and eliminating Hebrew characters entirely in hopes of attracting more non-Jews to their productions. These efforts made little difference. With

⁶⁰³ "Belgian Queen Visits Yiddish Theatre to Express Sympathies with Jews," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 29 November 1933.

⁶⁰⁴ "The production side of the troupe is lacking in many of the qualities that make for successful staging," wrote one reviewer in London, "Which is a pity - for a play so finely conceived and written and players so skilled individually deserve better luck." A.B.L. "The Dybbuk," *The Jewish Chronicle*, April 1934. Nachum Melnick and Devorah Rosenblum Papers (RG 1147), Box 3, Folder 36, YIVO.

debts mounting and not enough cash on hand to cover the actors' salaries, Mazo was forced to ask everyone to perform without pay for a few weeks so that the company could afford its return trip to Warsaw. Not surprisingly, this led to bitter quarrels between Mazo and the actors that culminated in the creation of yet another Vilna Troupe when one group of actors defied Mazo and immediately returned to Poland as a separate company while another group continued performing without pay under Mazo's direction and finished out the tour he had planned. When the tour came to an end, another argument erupted over the company's next step. Once again, some sided with Mazo and returned to Eastern Europe under his leadership while others defected from the company and took up work with other Yiddish art theaters in Western Europe, South America, and the United States.

Hoping for a second chance, Mazo brought his troupe to Vilna, where they presented two new plays in 1935: Soviet Yiddish writer Dovid Bergelson's dark socialist drama *The Breadmill* and a new translation of Eugene O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (retitled *Shvartse geto* [*Black Ghetto*]), which marked the first – and last – time that Vilna Troupe actors would perform in blackface. O'Neill's drama about a doomed romance between a white woman and a black man in a racist community was a timely choice. The rash of anti-Jewish legislation passed by the German Reichstag after Hitler's rise to power in 1933 was a major topic of conversation among Eastern European Jewry in the mid-1930's, and the primarily Jewish audiences that attended *Shvartse geto* readily understood that while O'Neill may have been writing about racial tensions in the United States, the Vilna Troupe's version was just as much about deteriorating relations between Jews and non-Jews in Nazi Germany.

But Vilna's Jewish population was not large enough to support Mazo's Vilna Troupe for long, and with anti-Semitism on the rise, few of Vilna's non-Jewish residents were interested in

buying tickets. For non-Jews, going to see a Jewish theater company had held few major negative consequences back in the 1920's, when artistic cosmopolitanism held full sway and the Vilna Troupe was widely regarded by prominent theater artists around the world as equal to the best European companies of the period. But it was something else altogether to enter a Yiddish theater fifteen years later, when overtly anti-Semitic rhetoric, legislation, and acts of violence against Jews were on the rise across Europe. In 1933 alone, the combined tally of anti-Semitic acts in Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Romania more than quadrupled; while these numbers fluctuated somewhat over the next few years, rates of anti-Semitic violence in Europe would remain high throughout the remainder of the decade.⁶⁰⁵ In this climate of rapidly escalating anti-Semitism, going to a Yiddish show could no longer be an innocuous act. For non-Jews across Europe, simply attending a Vilna Troupe production was a risky political statement that could have far-reaching consequences. The devoted non-Jewish following that previous touring Vilna Troupes had come to expect from Western Europeans was thus virtually non-existent by the time Mazo took his branch of the company on their first western tour.

Nearly bankrupt, the actors returned to Warsaw, where they managed to convince the local Jewish community to contribute a sizable subsidy in order to save the company from immediate bankruptcy. We are the very last Vilna Troupe in the world, Mazo told community leaders. Surely Warsaw would not want to go down in history as responsible for the end of such a long-standing Jewish artistic tradition? A subsidy of 3,000 zlotys enabled Mazo to finally make good on his promise to pay the actors their back-owed salaries while also funding the preparation of two new productions: Israel Aksenfeld's *Rekrutn* [*Recruits*], which had recently had a strong run at the proletarian Yiddish theater Artef in New York, and Yiddish humorist Der Tunkeler

⁶⁰⁵ See William Brustein, *Roots of Hate: Anti-Semitism in Europe Before the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15-16.

(Yosef Tunkl)'s ironic comedy *Gots ganovim* [*God's Thieves*].⁶⁰⁶ But to the actors' dismay, both productions were complete flops. The company had gone bankrupt.

After twenty years of working continuously for the Vilna Troupe, Mazo gathered the actors and told them that he was formally disbanded the company. He had accepted a long-standing offer from American director Maurice Schwartz to join the Yiddish Art Theater in New York.⁶⁰⁷ Like so many *Vilner* before him, Mazo would quickly discover that his commitment to high art theater was no match for Second Avenue's commercialism or Schwartz's notorious egotism; after just one season, he returned disillusioned to Warsaw, never again to work with another theater company. The dream was over, and a darker challenge was fast approaching. The same month that Mazo's Vilna Troupe dissolved also brought the passage of Hitler's Nuremberg Laws, a troubling coincidence that did not go unnoticed by Europe's Jews.

The Vilna Troupes entered the 1930's more numerous and widespread than ever before, but scarcely six years later, the most famous Yiddish theater company of all had vanished for good. What caused a phenomenon that had outlasted decades of upheavals to finally disappear? The declining reputation of Yiddish and Yiddish culture among Jewish youth was one reason, but there were others. On the one hand, the financial plight of the Jewish masses during the Depression years destroyed the Vilna Troupe's core audience base; on the other, non-Jews were significantly less likely to attend the productions of a Yiddish theater company in an atmosphere of rising anti-Semitism. Just as a peculiar confluence of historical events during the First World War had led to the creation of the original Vilna Troupe, so too were external political and economic circumstances largely responsible for its demise.

⁶⁰⁶ Waislitz, "Der gang in der velt," 49.

⁶⁰⁷ Turkow-Grudberg, *Yidish teater in Poyln*, 56.

When Mazo's Vilna Troupe had last left Warsaw back in 1930, the company called a press conference to explain why it could not remain in the city that it had long hoped to call home. A visibly distraught Mazo leveled with the press about his company's plight. The Vilna Troupe, Mazo told reporters, has been more successful than any other Yiddish theater company in history, regularly bringing in an average of 1100 zlotys per performance. But its expenses were also greater than any other Yiddish theater in history. With an average cost of 900 zlotys per day to cover production costs and travel expenses alone (Mazo estimated that the Troupe had to transport about 6000 kilos of sets, costumes, lights, and props with them everywhere they traveled), the Troupe was only left with about 200 zlotys per day to pay its 15-30 actors along with the dozens of musicians, composers, painters, directors, stage managers, electricians, and stagehands who worked on their productions. In 1930, at the height of its success, the Vilna Troupe could scarcely keep afloat. It was a Catch-22: the company could barely afford to continue traveling but it could not afford to stay in one place either. And so the wandering actors would take to the road once again, full of "despair, desperation, and without a choice."⁶⁰⁸ For a time, constant travel enabled Mazo's Vilna Troupe to hold on – albeit barely – to its precarious economic position. But by 1935, as conditions for Jews deteriorated across Eastern Europe and non-Jewish audiences no longer attended the Yiddish theater, the transnational strategy that had enabled the Vilna Troupe to thrive for two decades was no longer enough to ensure its survival.

⁶⁰⁸ Nakhman Mayzel, "Dos letste vort fun di 'Vilner' far zeyer farlozn Poyln," *Literarische bleter*, 31 October 1930, 830.

PART TWO:

THE VILNA TROUPE NETWORK

The Vilna Troupe's influence did not vanish with the formal dissolution of its organizational structure. Rather, like Théâtre Libre after 1896 or the Group Theater after 1941, echoes of the ideology, aesthetic vision, and repertoire developed by the Vilna Troupe continued to linger in the modern theater long after the company's demise. Without the Vilna Troupe and the Yiddish Art Theater movement, we might never have had a Eugene Ionesco or a Harold Clurman; at the very least, their careers would have unfolded differently. An entire generation of groundbreaking scenic designers – including Mordechai Gorelik, Sam Leve, and Boris Aronson in the United States; and Szymon Syrkus and Andrzej Pronaszko in Poland – cut their teeth working in the Yiddish art theaters alongside former *Vilner*. We can thus say with a good deal of certainty that theater in the twentieth century would have been significantly different had it not been for the influence of the Vilna Troupe.

The aftereffects of the Vilna Troupe's admittedly brief tenure as a central player on the modernist theater scene continue to resonate nearly one hundred years after the company's founding. The modern theater is, to borrow from Marvin Carlson, profoundly *haunted* by the echoes of the Vilna Troupe and the Yiddish art theater movement, and the ghostly presence of the interwar Yiddish stage still lingers in the artistic sensibilities of the contemporary stage and screen. To cite just one example of a talent inspired, albeit indirectly, by the Yiddish art theater movement: Marlon Brando, arguably the most influential screen actor of the twentieth century. Brando frequently credited his success to the rigorous training he received at the hands of his mentor Stella Adler, famously quipping to journalists that had he not met Adler, "I might have

been a robber.”⁶⁰⁹ But Stella Adler, in turn, spent her own formative years acting in Yiddish art theater companies like Maurice Schwartz’s Yiddish Art Theater, where she performed alongside a young Paul Muni, who would also later become one of Brando’s mentors. Like virtually every professional New York Yiddish actor of their generation, Adler, Muni, and the entire Yiddish Art Theater company attended the Vilna Troupe’s American premiere of *The Dybbuk* in January of 1924. Not long after, Adler would enroll in the Theater Arts Institute under the auspices of the American Laboratory Theater run by former Moscow Art Theater actors Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya. It was under their tutelage that Adler first encountered the Method Acting techniques that became the foundation for her own approach to actor training.

That the Vilna Troupe’s American premiere and Adler’s enrollment in the American Laboratory Theater happened almost simultaneously was no coincidence. Theater historians have tended to credit the Moscow Art Theater’s first performances in New York with inspiring Adler to join the American Laboratory Theater. In fact, Adler’s interest in Stanislavsky and his methods predated the Moscow players’ arrival in the United States. As an actress involved in a Yiddish theater scene that was intimately connected to the activities of the Vilna Troupe, Adler would have likely have first encountered descriptions of Stanislavsky’s training methods and directing style in Yiddish articles about the rise of the *Vilner*. Word of the Moscow Art Theater’s activities reached American Jewish actors via Yiddish reviews of the Vilna Troupe many years before the famous Russian actors embarked on their first international tour. Similarly, Adler’s first taste of Chekhov was not from the Russian actors who had made his work famous but, rather, in a 1922 Yiddish-language production of *Uncle Vanya* at Schwartz’s Yiddish Art Theater

⁶⁰⁹ Budd Schulberg, “The King Who Would Be Man,” *Vanity Fair* (March 2005), available online at <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2005/03/brando200503> (accessed February 27, 2013).

– the very first production of Chekhov on American soil in any language.⁶¹⁰ It was thus the Yiddish art theater movement’s idolization of the Moscow Art Theater – inspired by the example of the Vilna Troupe – that ultimately paved the way for the emergence of the influential Stella Adler Acting Studio decades later. Adler’s Studio, in turn, was directly responsible for launching the careers of major American actors including Robert DeNiro, Harvey Keitel, Candice Bergen, Warren Beatty, Benicio Del Toro, Judy Garland, Martin Sheen, and dozens of others.

Stella Adler’s career continued to intersect with the Vilna Troupe over the course of the 1920’s. In 1928, Adler starred opposite Vilna Troupe actress Luba Kadison in a production of Sholem Asch’s *Di kishefmakherin fun Castille* [*The Witch of Castille*] at the Yiddish Art Theater. They became close friends and for years, Kadison would meet Adler and her husband, Harold Clurman, at the Café Royal on Second Avenue.

But the connection between Stella Adler and the Vilna Troupe does not end there. Richard Boleslavsky, a former Moscow Art Theater actor who was Stella Adler’s first acting teacher, also had Vilna Troupe connections of his own. In 1923, Boleslavsky had been a founding member of America’s first Yiddish drama school, where he taught alongside former Vilna Troupe director Mendl Elkin and key Yiddish art theater playwrights like Peretz Hirschbein, Dovid Pinski, and H. Leivick.⁶¹¹ Two years later, the teachers and pupils of this Yiddish drama school would form their own Yiddish art theater company modeled directly upon the Vilna Troupe called Unzer Teater [Our Theater]. Nearly everyone in this company was connected with the Vilna Troupe in one way or another: besides Elkin and the playwrights, the founding members of Unzer Teater also included former *Vilner* husband-and-wife acting team

⁶¹⁰ Boris, 117. Mazo’s Vilna Troupe also staged its own production of *Uncle Vanya* in the mid-1920s, but unlike Schwartz’s hit, theirs was a flop.

⁶¹¹ Sandrow, 276. The Yiddish theater critics A. Mukdoyni and S. Niger also taught for the school.

Chaim Shniur and Bela Belarina, as well as Egon Brecher, Dovid Herman's old directing partner from Vienna. Other members of Unzer Teater included actor David Vardi of Habima and an unknown young stage designer named Boris Aronson. In an explicit nod to the Vilna Troupe, Unzer Teater opened with a production of one of the company's most successful plays: Ansky's *Tog un nakht* [*Day and Night*]. As an experimental company, the directors were more than happy to give Boris Aronson free reign over the conception and execution of the set, costumes, and lighting; besides, nobody else in the company quite understood Aronson's strange ideas anyway. When *Tog un nakht* opened, Boris Aronson's designs catapulted him to the forefront of the American Jewish theater world almost overnight. After designing for prominent American Yiddish art theaters like Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater, the ARTEF workers' theater, and the Schildkraut Theater for a few years to steady acclaim, Aronson crossed over to the English-language stage in 1932, working first for the Group Theater and then on Broadway, where he would go on to win six Tony Awards for designing hit musicals like *Cabaret*, *Company*, *Follies*, and *Pacific Overtures*.

Aronson's innovative designs were instrumental in bringing about the adoption of abstract and non-realistic modalities on the mainstream American stage.⁶¹² Robert Brustein, the preeminent director, theater critic, and founder of the Yale Repertory Theater and the American Repertory Theater, has called Aronson "the leader of a national movement" whose unique design

⁶¹² See June Mamana, "From the Pale of Settlement to *Pacific Overtures*: The Evolution of Boris Aronson's Visual Aesthetic," Ph.D. Diss, Tufts University, 1997. As Mamana demonstrates, Aronson "contributed more than any other designer of his generation to the transformation of mainstream American scene design from a literal, representational craft dependent on flat painted backdrops and box sets to a sophisticated art that allowed the designer license to create abstract, architectural structures that sculpted the open three-dimensional stage space. [...] Aronson's architectonic sets infused life into American scene design and contributed to its gradual shift away from a prosaic realism toward an era of image-filled theatricalism." (1-2)

sensibility came to define contemporary American scenic design.⁶¹³ “Design in the Aronson tradition,” Brustein wrote in 1988, “is organic rather than decorative [...] Today’s most interesting stage designers try to realize a dramatic concept not just histrionically, through the actors, but visually, through the very tissue of the scenic surround, which at its best changes and develops very much like another character in the play.”⁶¹⁴ In fact, Aronson was directly responsible for the training of some of today’s most prominent designers. In the 1950’s, one of Aronson’s many Broadway apprentices was a young unknown named Ming Cho Lee, for whom Aronson’s designs opened his eyes “to the range and possibility of theater expression” that would become his lifelong obsession.⁶¹⁵ It was Aronson who first introduced Lee to the cutting-edge Constructivist aesthetics of the Russian and German stage; years later, Lee would describe Aronson as “an outside comet that fell into the Western world.”⁶¹⁶ Today, Lee is a famous Tony Award-winning designer in his own right and co-chair of the Yale School of Drama’s Design Department. The American Theatre Wing considers Lee’s work to have exerted “a greater influence on American scenography than any other contemporary designer,” and his former students include many of the most prominent scenic designers working in contemporary American theater and film, among them Tony Straiges, Santo Loquasto, and John Lee Beatty.⁶¹⁷

But decades after achieving mainstream success, Aronson still viewed his work with the Yiddish art theaters as the pinnacle of his career. “I did my most experimental work [at Unzer],

⁶¹³ Robert Brustein, “Design for Living Rooms (The Theatre of Boris Aronson)” in Brustein, *Reimagining American Theatre* (New York: Macmillan, 2003), 232.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid.

⁶¹⁶ Mamana, 2.

⁶¹⁷ “Ming Cho Lee” biography, American Theatre Wing, 2008. Available online at http://americantheatrewing.org/biography/detail/ming_cho_lee (accessed March 1, 2013).

which I haven't topped yet," he told reporters at the height of his Broadway career.⁶¹⁸ Aronson's pioneering work on Broadway inspired an entire generation of American designers to explore new methods of using shape and light onstage, but Aronson's notoriously unconventional approach, in turn, was developed in his early Yiddish art theater career. Aronson's conception of the stage as a kind of aesthetic laboratory, his transnational aesthetic that drew equally upon Russian, Jewish, Polish, and German theaters for inspiration, his interest in theatrical abstraction, his technical prowess and ability to make something out of nothing regardless of budget – all of these characteristics derived directly from the artistic ideology of the Vilna Troupe and the Yiddish art theater movement. For Aronson, Yiddish art theater was virtually synonymous with fresh ideas; when asked in 1960 whether he thought the Yiddish art theater movement influenced American theater practice, Aronson unequivocally replied:

Yes. Many people from the American stage constantly came to the Yiddish Art Theatre and obtained ideas. These new ideas became international. Last summer, I went to Stratford, English, to design *Coriolanus* for Olivier's production. Why did he want me? Because he wanted *a new approach*.⁶¹⁹

The contemporary American theater thus owes significant debts to the Vilna Troupe both for incubating the game-changing work of Stella Adler, the American Laboratory Theater, and the Group Theater and for its role in developing the Aronsonian roots of contemporary scenic design.

Or, to put all of this in visual terms:

⁶¹⁸ Martin Boris, "The Life & Death of a Yiddish Art Theatre," Museum of Family History. Available online at <http://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/yt-lad-yat.htm> (accessed March 3, 2013).

⁶¹⁹ My emphasis. Lifson, 689. From Lifson's 1960 interview with Boris Aronson.

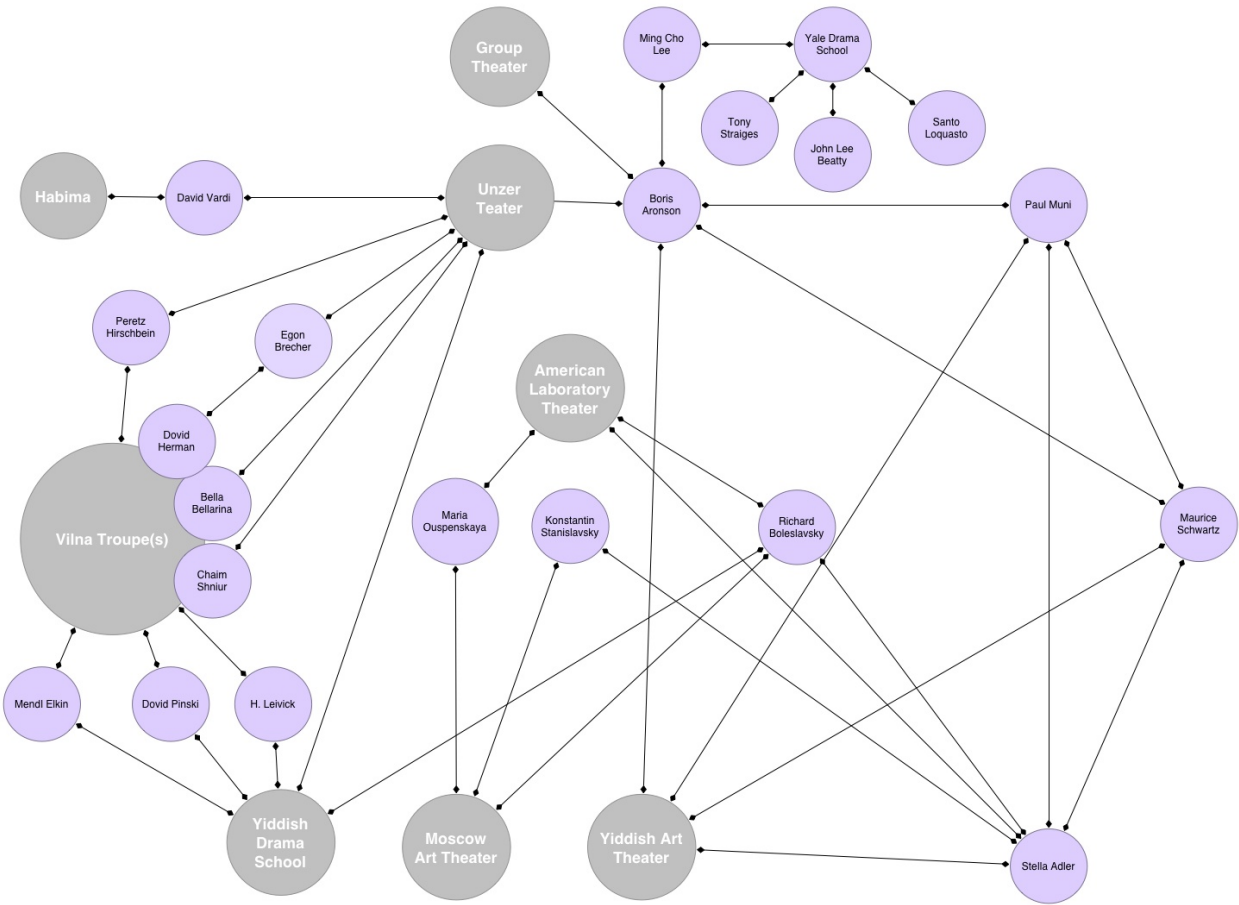


Figure 5: Vilna Troupe Network Diagram Close-Up

This is but one example of the kind of vibrant artistic networks that were centered around the *Vilner* during the interwar period. The Vilna Troupe was a pivotal node in a vast transnational network that included many of the leading figures of the interwar stage: Stanislavsky, Reinhardt, Meyerhold, Arthur Hopkins, Leon Schiller, Juliusz Osterwa, David Belasco, Clifford Odets, and dozens of others. The Vilna Troupe’s network thus forged specific pathways for the rapid circulation of theatrical ideas and dialogue across borders both geographical - i.e. East and West; Europe and America – and figurative – i.e. between Jews and non-Jews, between purveyors of “high culture” and popular entertainers, and so on.

The Vilna Troupe’s role at the nexus of Western interwar theater practice has long been invisible to theater historians, with the precise details of the company’s connections to other

theater practitioners and companies buried in Yiddish actors' archives and in untranslated Yiddish books, letters, and theatrical ephemera. To see the echoes of the interwar Yiddish theater in contemporary artistic practice requires knowledge of the complex patterns of Jewish migration during this period, an understanding of the peculiar mechanics of diaspora nationalism, which positioned modern Yiddish culture and its theater as a simultaneously national and cosmopolitan enterprise, and an understanding of the complex ways in which Yiddish theater artists interacted with one another and with their better-known non-Jewish counterparts during this period.

The Vilna Troupe's vast size, multiplicity, and characteristic geographical instability add more challenges. If one reads Yiddish, you can find well-documented studies and monographs about other Yiddish theaters of the period (GOSET, Ararat, Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater, the Ida Kaminska theater, etc.). But to the great consternation of the *Vilner* during their lifetimes, no Yiddish writer ever wrote a monograph about the most famous Yiddish theater company of them all. This lack of secondary material was a known fact among Yiddish theater historians, many of whom lamented the paucity of scholarship on the subject without ever attempting a book-length study of the Vilna Troupe themselves. Even those who were closely involved with the company were reluctant to take up the task. For example, Yiddish theater critic, biographer, and nonfiction author Nakhman Mayzel was in many ways a perfect candidate. Mayzel had a uniquely accurate sense of the Vilna Troupe's scope and organizational structure because he had frequently embedded himself in various incarnations of the company in order to conduct research for his reviews. But even a renowned writer like Mayzel who had intimate knowledge of multiple Vilna Troupe companies was convinced that the task lay beyond his capabilities. In his otherwise comprehensive book about Polish-Jewish cultural life between the two World Wars, Mayzel explained the relative absence of material on the Vilna Troupe by telling readers:

Yes, we have long needed [a history] about that very Vilna Troupe [...] It has long needed to be written, and more than once somebody decided to write the history of the *Vilner* and solemnly vowed as much before the open graves of former Vilna Troupe members, swearing to complete it. But it seems that there is not the right person who will do it, nor is there the organization to subsidize [the writing of] such an important cultural and historical monograph.⁶²⁰

Similarly, Vilna Troupe actor Joseph Buloff often remarked in interviews that in order to pen a proper history of the Vilna Troupe, a writer would need to know dozens of languages (Yiddish, German, Polish, Romanian, Hebrew, French, Dutch, Russian, English, Afrikaans, Lithuanian, and Spanish, among others) simply to be able to read the multilingual reviews of the company in Buloff's meticulously-organized scrapbooks. "The trouble is the languages, who is going to read all these languages, you know?" Buloff told Jack Garfein in an interview. "There'll always be people who part of me they wouldn't know because it's in Romanian, or South African, or American, or Yiddish."⁶²¹

The Troupe's notoriously complex organizational structure, combined with the difficulty of simply determining *who* and *where* the Vilna Troupe was at any given moment, made the very act of writing about the Vilna Troupe a contentious career move. In a theatrical landscape in which the livelihoods of hundreds of actors depended upon a very fluid definition of the term *Vilner*, any attempt to specifically situate "the Vilna Troupe" was bound to spark controversy. No Yiddish writer, no matter how accomplished, was immune. When Dr. Alexander Mukdoyni, the most highly regarded Yiddish theater critic of his generation, wrote a brief profile of the Vilna Troupe that focused primarily (though not exclusively) on Azro and Alomis' company, he received a flurry of letters from furious actors claiming that he had gotten it all wrong. Mukdoyni may have been a renowned writer who had more or less invented the field of Yiddish theater

⁶²⁰ Mayzel, *Geven a mol a lebn*, 120.

⁶²¹ Joseph Buloff, int. with Jack Garfein, 1980.

criticism, but his reputation did not prevent angry *Vilner* and their fans from labeling him a fraud.⁶²² And so Mukdoyni, like many of his colleagues, turned his attention elsewhere – continuing to review occasional Vilna Troupe productions and writing profiles of *individual* actors without ever again trying to analyze the broader contours of the company. One must always be careful when mentioning the Vilna Troupe in public, Mukdoyni cautioned his readers, for even the most casual conversations about the company almost always end with a heated argument.⁶²³

The erstwhile Vilna Troupe historian may no longer have to contend with controversy and angry letters from outraged *Vilner*, but much of Mayzel, Buloff, and Mukdoyni’s warnings still ring true three-quarters of a century later. The actors’ ever-fluctuating relationships with multiple incarnations of the Vilna Troupe present a complex historical puzzle that is difficult to untangle. Compounding the problem is the tendency among the *Vilner* to treat each individual’s pathway through a myriad of branch companies as though it were a single “Vilna Troupe” affiliation. If we judge by the actors’ memoirs, the “real” Vilna Troupe was simply whichever company the actor in question happened to be working with at any given moment.

If anything, the Vilna Troupe’s legacy is even more difficult to ascertain. As Yiddish actors entered mainstream (i.e. non-Jewish) theater culture more fully, many consciously shed their Jewish identities by changing their names and rewriting the narratives of their careers. In the process, the role that Yiddish theater played in their emergence was often willfully obscured. The Jewish actors and directors who were most successful at entering mainstream theater culture were often the same artists who were most skilled at these acts of erasure: Paul Muni’s de-Judaization of his name, for example. Those who were less skilled assimilators – like Alexander

⁶²² Mukdoyni, “Alte bakantn,” 7.

⁶²³ Ibid.

Azro, who, try as he might, could not shake the thick Yiddish accent that doomed his brief Hollywood career – rarely achieved success outside of the Yiddish stage and were thus largely forgotten in the annals of theater history.

But the Vilna Troupe historian of the twenty-first century has access to emerging tools and methodologies that resolve some of these challenges by providing new perspective on the complex artistic networks forged by the *Vilner*. If we leverage digital technology to literally map out the Vilna Troupe’s multifaceted connections to other interwar theater artists, an alternative genealogy of twentieth-century theater practice comes into focus. To further understand how the artists and companies of the Vilna Troupe functioned in relation to one another, we can turn to the emerging discipline of network theory: a fusion of computer science, mathematical modeling, and the social sciences that uses data visualization to analyze complex relationships between individuals and organizations. Particularly useful in considering a phenomenon like the Vilna Troupe is the sub-discipline of social network analysis, which considers how “actors” (individuals, groups, organizations, etc) are connected to other “actors” via different types of social relationships.⁶²⁴ In the case of the Vilna Troupe, these “actors” were Yiddish theater artists who were linked to other theater practitioners, companies, and artistic movements in a variety of ways: as students, teachers, collaborators, friends, and influencers.

The Vilna Troupe was the central node in a multi-level network (e.g. a complex network where some nodes – in this case, individual actors – are members of other nodes – like theater

⁶²⁴ See C. Haythornthwaite, “Social Network Analysis: An Approach and Technique for the Study of Information Exchange,” *Library and Information Science Research* 18 (1996): 323-342; J. Scott, *Social Network Analysis: A Handbook* (London: Sage, 2000); S. Wasserman and K. Faust, *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and L.C. Freeman, D.R. White, and A.K. Romney, *Research Methods in Social Network Analysis* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992).

companies) that extended across dozens of countries during the interwar period.⁶²⁵ A network, as defined by social scientists, is a discrete organizational form that is characterized by “lateral” and “reciprocal patterns of communication and exchange.”⁶²⁶ Any organization that is structured as a network is explicitly non-hierarchical. Network organizations upend traditional distinctions between high and low by creating alternative, hierarchy-resistant pathways for the dissemination of ideas.

Examining the Vilna Troupe as a network thus allows us to discard the notion of hierarchy altogether and embrace the multiplicity of ways in which the Troupe was connected to other theater practitioners. It would be a tremendous overstatement to claim that the Vilna Troupe was responsible for the advent of European theatrical modernism; likewise, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the Vilna Troupe was simply a derivative of the Moscow Art Theater. Instead, the Vilna Troupe was an integral part of a complex and non-hierarchical web of entangled artistic collaborations, theatrical training practices, and networks of influence. The relationship between the interwar theatrical avant-garde and the Yiddish art theater movement is thus best represented as a series of *multidirectional* interactions between performers and companies who simultaneously borrowed from and influenced one another. A model that positions the Vilna Troupe at the *center* of a (non-hierarchical) multi-level network reveals previously invisible relationships between theater practitioners who otherwise had little connection with one another.

⁶²⁵ On multilevel networks, see Thomas P. Moliterno and Douglas M. Mahoney, “Network Theory of Organization: A Multilevel Approach,” *Journal of Management* 37.2 (March 2011): 443-467.

⁶²⁶ Walter W. Powell, “Neither Market Nor Hierarchy: Network Forms of Organization,” *Research in Organizational Behavior* 12 (1990): 295-336.

For example, let us begin by placing 26 of the most famous and well-connected Vilna Troupe artists at the center of a network visualization:

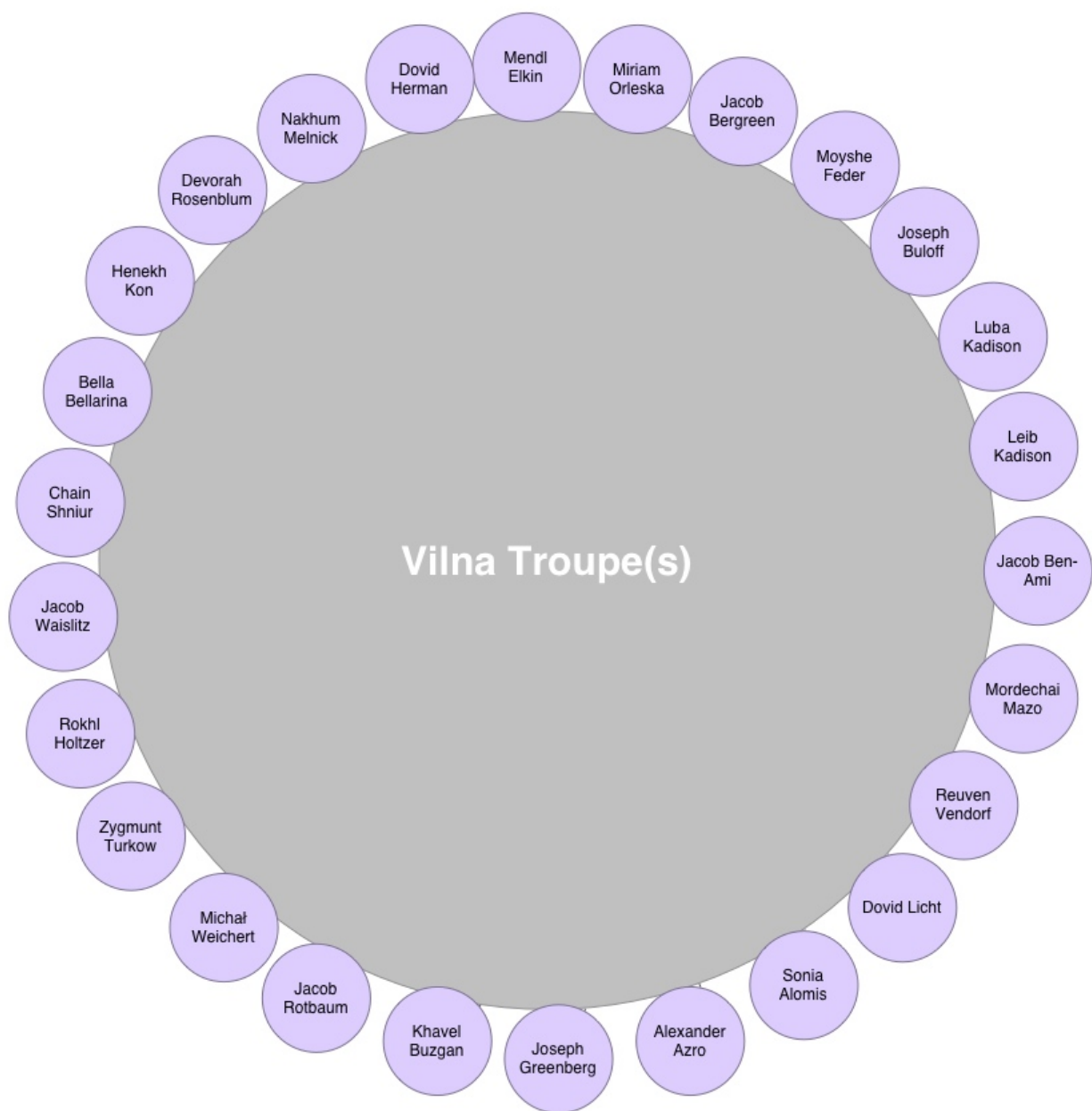


Figure 6: Vilna Troupe Actors

The next layer adds the various individuals and schools with whom these actors studied prior to their involvement with the Vilna Troupe:

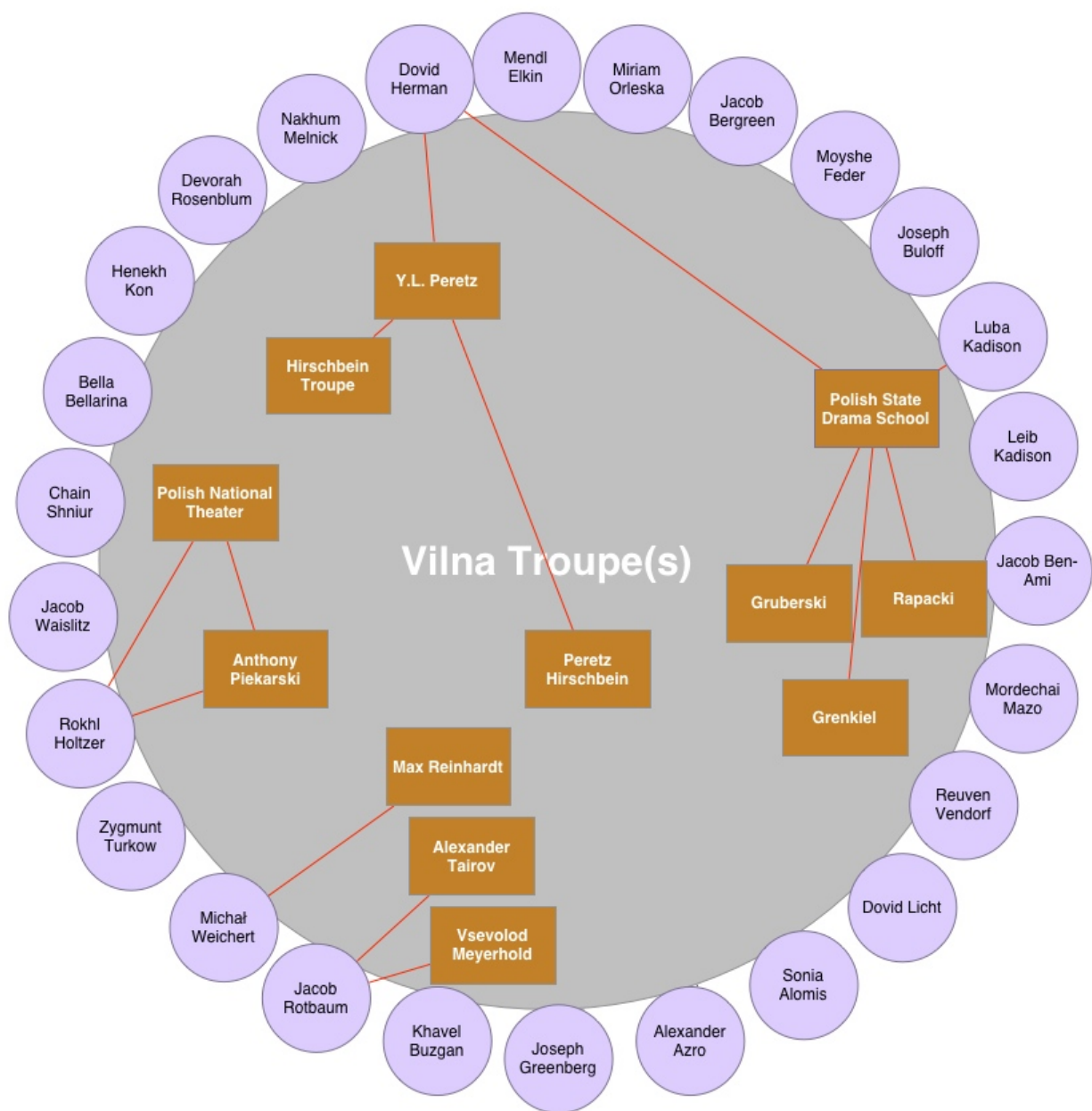


Figure 7: Vilna Troupe Antecedents

If we then add in the other actors and companies that these Vilna Troupe actors directly collaborated with (in red), we can begin to glimpse the full dimension of the *Vilner* influence:

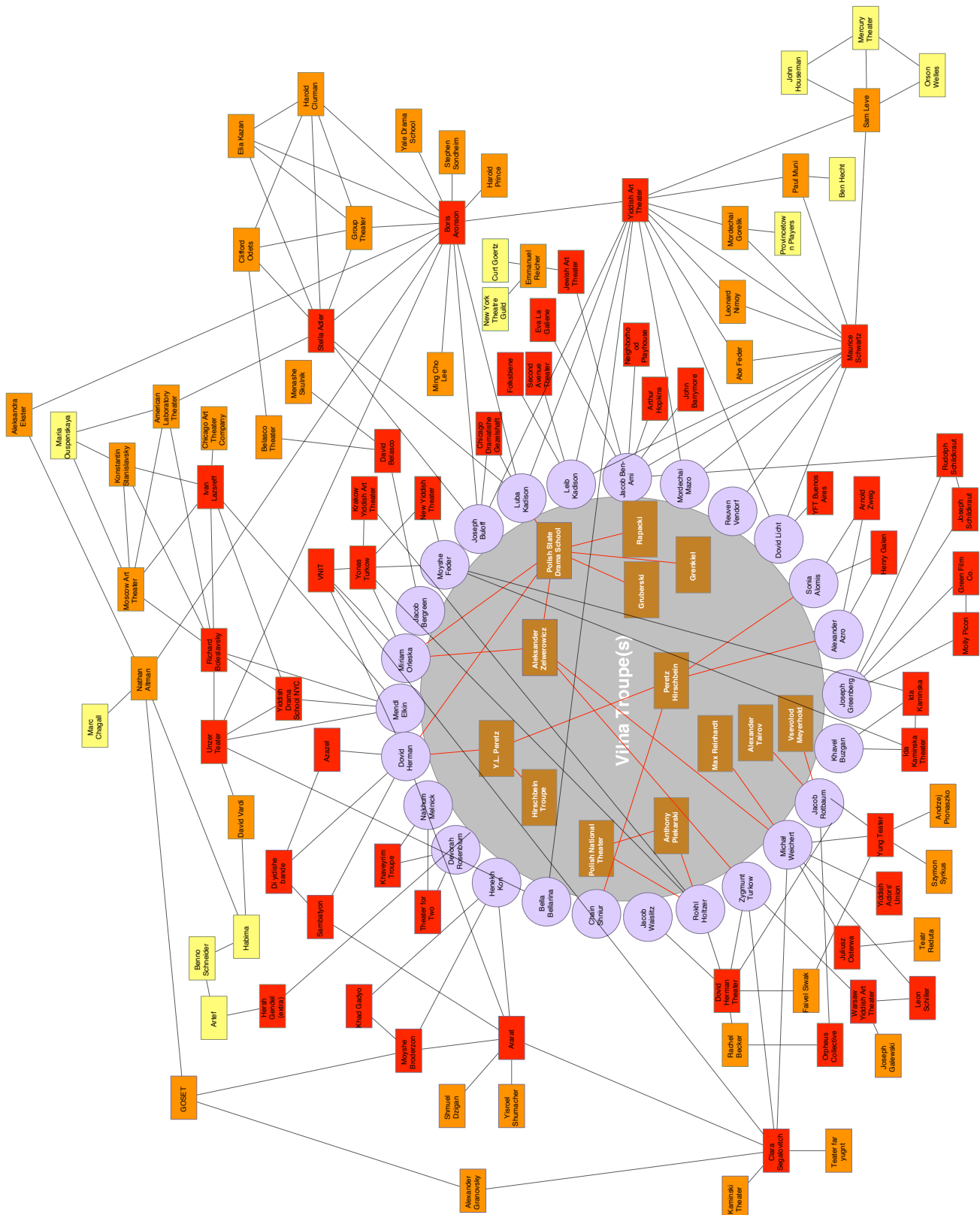


Figure 9: Vilna Troupe Full Network Diagram

A network model of the interwar stage that takes the Vilna Troupe as its starting point reveals whole centers of activity that were concentrated around particular nodes like Dovid Herman, who not only personally trained nearly every major Yiddish director of the interwar period, but also maintained close professional ties to key figures in the Polish, Russian, and German theatrical avant-garde. The members of the Vilna Troupe thus functioned as transnational cultural conduits, connecting theater artists in Russia and Eastern Europe with work that was happening in North and South America; and vice versa.

Network theory also offers us another way of approaching the transnationalism of the Vilna Troupe phenomenon by employing the theoretical construct of a small-world network.⁶²⁷ A small-world network is a particular kind of hyper-interconnected network in which almost any node can be reached via a small number of “hops” from almost any other node, regardless of the geographical or physical proximity between them.⁶²⁸ In other words, small-world social networks forge strong connections across traditional boundaries. Nationality, language, ethnicity, geographical distance – all are more or less irrelevant within the framework of a small-world network, in which *connectivity* is all that matters. The more readily one can “leap” from one quadrant to another, the more the network corresponds to the “small-world” model. For instance, in the network depicted above, Polish director Leon Schiller and American director David Belasco both worked *directly* with Vilna Troupe members; there is thus a distinct indirect connection between the two directors in spite of the geographical distance between them and the fact that they never actually met. The Vilna Troupe was the connective tissue that bound all of

⁶²⁷ See Duncan J. Watts and Steven H. Strogatz, “Collective Dynamics of ‘Small-World’ Networks,” *Nature* 393 (June 1998): 440-442 and D. Watts, *Small Worlds* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁶²⁸ More specifically, small-world networks correspond to a specific mathematical formula, where the distance or number of “hops” (L) between any two nodes chosen at random is directly proportional to the number of nodes in the network (N). *Ibid.*, 441.

these figures together, regardless of any individual theater practitioner's nationality or geographical location. In other words, the Vilna Troupe's role at the center of a small-world artistic network was a primary feature of the company's transnationalism. Small-world network theory thus offers an intriguing model for explaining the rapid transmission of theatrical ideas between Vilna Troupe artists across multiple locales. Just as an infectious disease can be spread more quickly in a small-world network, so too can aesthetic trends be disseminated more easily via a small-world network than within a single organization or in a more standard lattice network. The model of a "small-world network" thus provides an ideal theoretical rubric for evaluating the particular transnational, transcultural, and translinguistic achievements of the Vilna Troupe.

Applying network theory to the Vilna Troupe reveals the buried legacy of the Yiddish art theater movement in contemporary theater and film. Echoes of the Vilna Troupe continue to resound in the work of thousands of performers who were trained, directly or indirectly, under the Yiddish art theater rubric via influential teachers and directors like Stella Adler, Richard Boleslavsky, Eugene Ionesco, and Leon Schiller and among the countless designers who were inspired by the work of Boris Aronson, Mordechai Gorelik, Szymon Syrkus, and others. Mapping the Vilna Troupe network vis-à-vis its members' prolific professional relationships with other theater practitioners reveals an alternative genealogy of twentieth-century theater history that renders new connections between diverse groups of theater artists visible for the first time.

PART THREE: MICROHISTORY REDUX

Over the course of its twenty-year tenure, hundreds of individual theater artists worked under the auspices of the Vilna Troupe. Yet just as most of these artists performed with *multiple* incarnations of the Vilna Troupe, most also worked variously for other non-*Vilner* companies during their careers. In fact, it was extremely unusual for a Vilna Troupe member to work exclusively with the company. In contrast, most of the Vilna Troupe's artistic personnel thought of their affiliation with the company as a kind of flexible template. Being a member of the Vilna Troupe was a portable artistic identity that followed an actor wherever he or she went, regardless of where or with whom or even in what language one was performing. As the saying went, once a *Vilner*, always a *Vilner*. The extreme geographical instability of Ashkenazic Jewry during this period made it nearly impossible for any Yiddish theater artist to remain with a single company or in a single city for long. Yiddish actors constantly had to re-evaluate the precarity of their economic position season by season (if one was lucky enough to be a member of a self-sustaining company) or more often, month by month. Even the most committed actors cycled in and out of various Vilna Troupes while also performing variously for other Yiddish and Hebrew theater companies or on the non-Jewish stage.

The career trajectories of individual artists associated with the Vilna Troupe thus offer an alternative, yet equally accurate, narrative of how the Troupe operated. Any reading of the Vilna Troupe that does not take into account the movement of its individual artists excludes a crucial dimension of the company's history. In fact, the movement of individual artists in and out of various Vilna Troupe branches was the *primary* means by which the company forged connections with other theater practitioners around the world. The rapid cycling of performers in and out of the Vilna Troupe was thus crucial to the company's transnational success, for it was

through individual defections from the Vilna Troupe that the company built its global artistic network, and it was via this network that its reputation was disseminated.

Moreover, it is only by tracing the pathways of individuals through the Vilna Troupe that the full transnational dimensions of the Yiddish art theater movement come into focus. Although all of the companies that operated under the “Vilna Troupe” name traveled, their tours remained confined to three geographical regions: Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and North America. Technically speaking, no Vilna Troupe ever performed east of Odessa, south of Bucharest, north of Vilna, or west of San Francisco. Yet the company’s individual actors frequently performed *Vilner* repertoire in the famous Vilna Troupe style across a geographical terrain that was significantly larger. It was not uncommon for an actor working in Sao Paulo, Bulawayo, or Auckland to publicize their solo projects using the Vilna Troupe name. When Alexander Azro and Sonia Alomis did a solo show in Glasgow in 1935 or in Brooklyn in 1936 or in Mexico City in 1942, they billed themselves as “Founders and Principles of the World Famous Original Vilna Troupe” and prominently displayed the company’s famous logo.⁶²⁹ These appropriations of the Vilna Troupe brand may have been unofficial, but they were also an integral part of the Vilna Troupe phenomenon.

Vilna Troupe actors often considered their work with the Troupe to encompass performances with multiple theater companies. For example, Leib Kadison wrote in his memoirs that he performed with the Vilna Troupe for fifteen years. In truth, Kadison’s “fifteen year” career with “the” Vilna Troupe” actually included work with three different Vilna Troupe companies along with productions for Maurice Schwartz’s Yiddish Art Theater, the Folksbiene,

⁶²⁹ These programs can be found in the Judaica Ephemera Collection, Theater Series B, Collection 3, Eastern Europe Box 16292, Harvard Judaica Division.

and several other American Yiddish theaters.⁶³⁰ But to Kadison, “the Vilna Troupe” was a kind of shorthand for the overall trajectory of his career during this period. With so many Vilna Troupes operating simultaneously and hundreds of theater artists who claimed affiliation with the company, is it any wonder that the *Vilner* thought of “the Vilna Troupe” as a flexible artistic ideology that that could be applied to almost any Yiddish art theater company?

The distinction between the geographical pathways of formal Vilna Troupe companies and the individual travels of its actors becomes readily apparent if we compare them on a map. First, let us examine the development of the “official” Vilna Troupe branches. At first, the Vilna Troupe was a small company based in a single city, with a limited geographical presence confined to a small region in Eastern Europe:

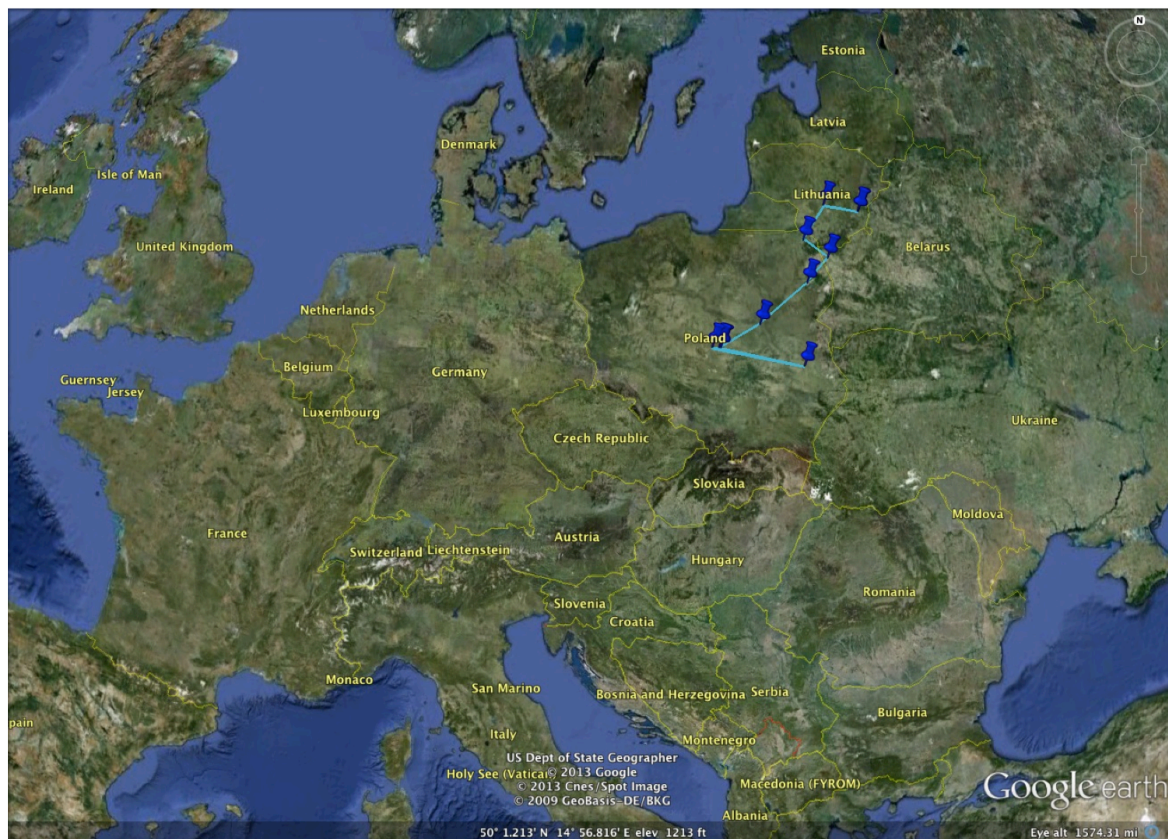


Figure 10: Original Vilna Troupe, 1915 – 1917

⁶³⁰ Leib Kadison, “A bisl zikhroynes,” 692.

By 1921, there were two Vilna Troupe companies touring simultaneously:

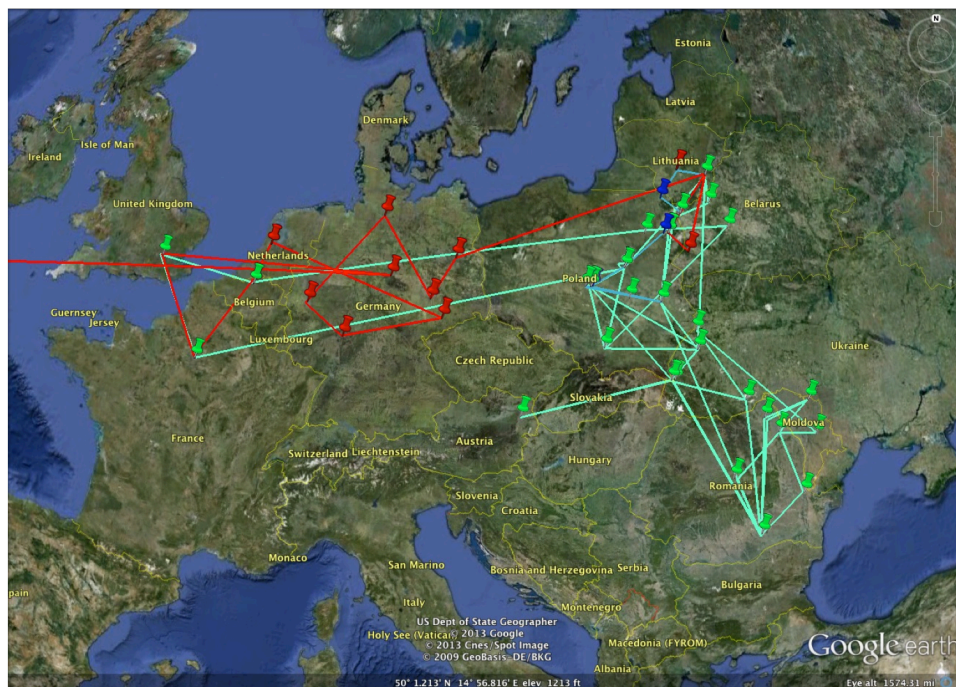


Figure 11: Mazo (Green) and Azro/Alomis (Red) Vilna Troupes, 1921 – 1924

In the mid-1920's, there were three Vilna Troupes operating from Odessa to Los Angeles:

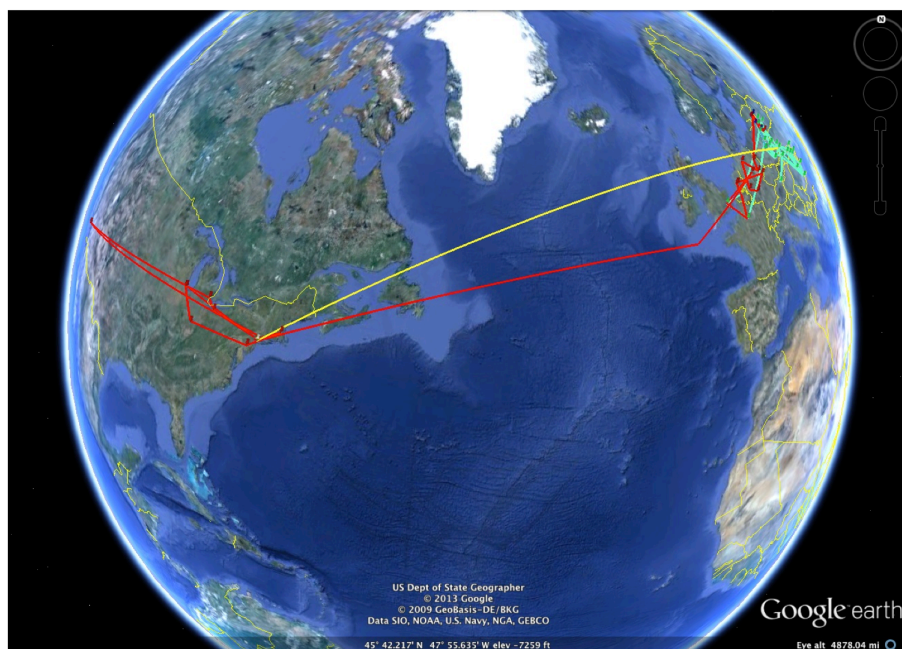


Figure 12: The Vilna Troupe in 1927

Several more Vilna Troupes emerged during the 1930's, but these new companies continued to travel the same established circuits as previous incarnations (though American-based Vilna Troupes did expand their tour circuit slightly to include Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg). The map above, then, represents the “official” geographical trajectory of the Vilna Troupe.

But it is only when we add the traveling performances of *individual* Vilna Troupe actors to this map that we can see the true scope of the company's transnational reach. Mapping the career of Vilna Troupe actor Joseph Buloff (represented here in purple), for instance, expands the geographical territory of the Troupe's activities to include Argentina, Brazil, and Israel.

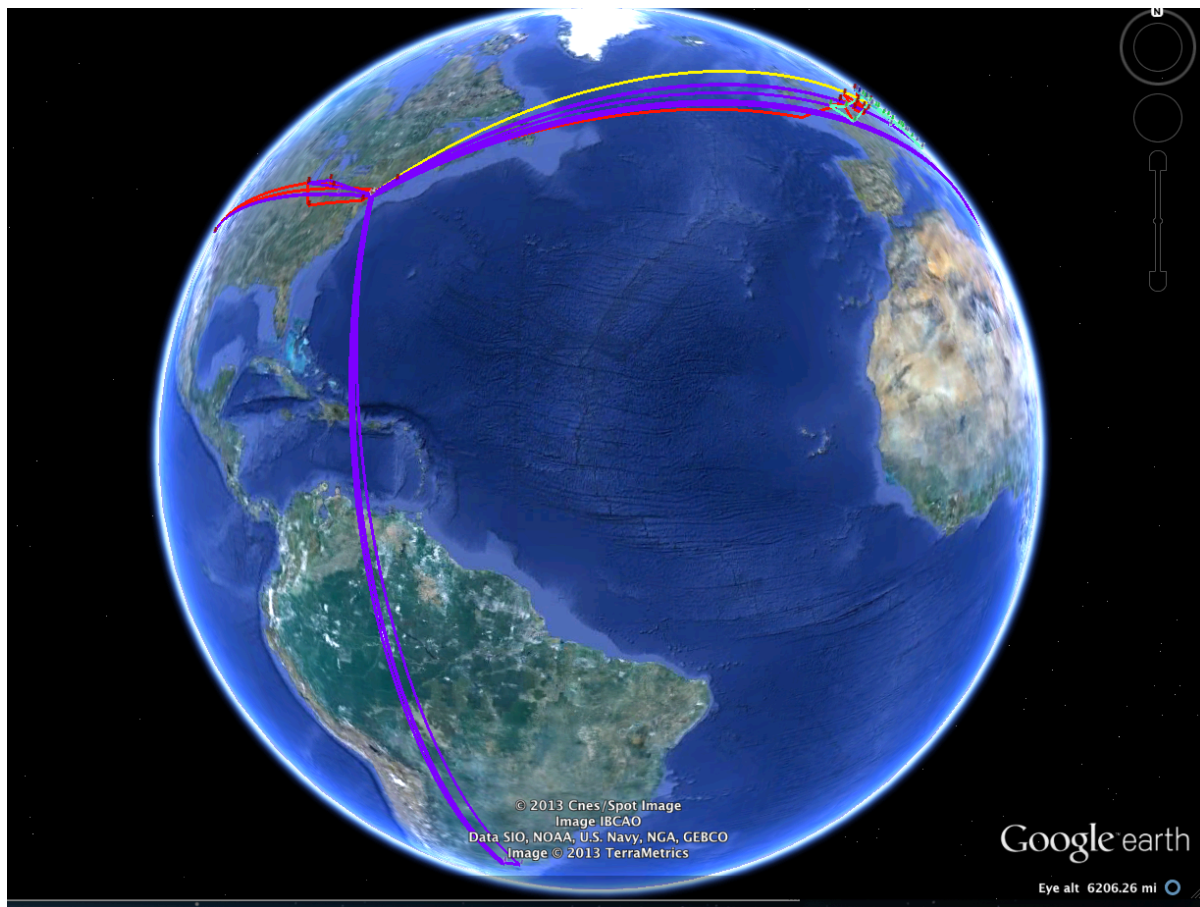
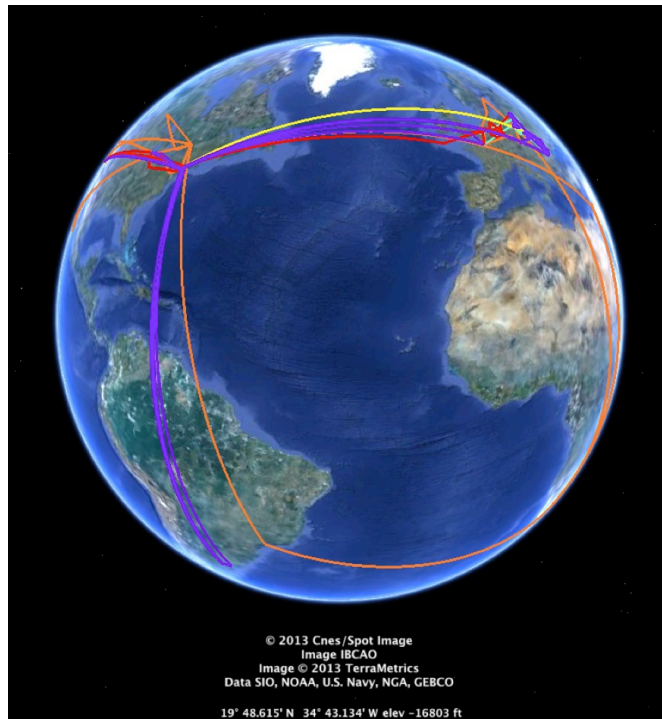


Figure 13: Joseph Buloff's Career

If we then add the career of an actor like Jacob Waislitz (in orange), the territory expands again to include Sweden, South Africa, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Australia, and New Zealand.



Figures 14: Jacob Waislitz's Career

Though no formal Vilna Troupe was ever active in South America, Africa, or Australia, affiliated actors like Buloff and Waislitz traveled to these countries and staged classics from the

Vilna Troupe repertoire, advertised their status as *Vilner*, and employed the famous Vilna Troupe logo in their posters and programs.

Just as applying network theory to the Vilna Troupe reveals the company's consistently strong ties to other theater practitioners and organizations, a microhistorical approach to the Vilna Troupe offers another framework for analyzing the actual geographical scope of the Vilna Troupe's impact. Microhistory, according to historian Charles Joyner, is a discipline that "asks large questions in small places."⁶³¹ Methodologically, microhistory involves a tight focus on particular events, communities, and individuals. Unlike the case study, in which something particular is analyzed as representative of larger trends, microhistory embraces exceptionality. As Giovanni Levi has argued, microhistory rejects the "sacrifice of individual elements to generalization" and instead "accentuates individual lives and events" in order to add new perspective to dominant historical narratives.⁶³²

In keeping with microhistory's emphasis on the outlier, let us briefly trace the career of one specific family of Vilna Troupe-affiliated actors: husband-and-wife acting team Jacob and Yokheved Waislitz, their actor-son David Waislitz, their actress-daughter Mila Waislitz Potashinski, and their actor-son-in-law Moyshe Potashinski, all of whom performed together for years in Mazo's branch of the Vilna Troupe. All of these actors were also extremely influential figures in the Yiddish art theater movement at large.

The Waislitzes may have been influential, but their career paths were by no means representative of the typical Vilna Troupe actor. The family was unusual in affiliating solely with one branch of the Vilna Troupe, and they were also far more mobile than most of their

⁶³¹ Charles W. Joyner, *Shared Traditions: Southern History and Folk Culture* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1999), 1.

⁶³² Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory" in Peter Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 112.

colleagues. Yet although the Waislitzes were not representative of the “average” Vilna Troupe artist, their careers offer important insight into the transnational dimensions of the Yiddish art theater movement at large. A microhistorical focus on this single family of actors provides a way to reconcile the gap between the collective phenomenon of the Vilna Troupe, as detailed in the previous chapters, and the idiosyncratic experiences of the hundreds of individual artists who worked under its auspices.

Jacob Waislitz and the Yiddish Art Theater Movement South of the Equator

Jacob Waislitz (1891-1966) and his family were among the most well traveled members of the Vilna Troupe. The Waislitzes traversed a wider geographical territory than any of their Vilna Troupe colleagues, ultimately performing in more locales than most other Jewish actors of their generation. Emerging out of Eastern Europe, they performed across Europe, North and South America, Sub-Saharan Africa, Israel, and Australasia, bringing a Vilna Troupe-inspired repertoire, rehearsal methodology, and aesthetic to Jewish communities across the globe. It was Jacob Waislitz and his family who, more than anyone else, were responsible for introducing the theatrical ideas developed by the Vilna Troupe to the semi-isolated Jewish communities of Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Argentina, Rhodesia, and South Africa. Prior to the Waislitzes’ travels, the Yiddish art theater movement’s transnational reach had remained almost entirely within the Northern Hemisphere. But while most other Vilna Troupe actors in the 1930’s were content to stick to the standard Eastern Europe – Western Europe – North America tour circuits (with the occasional southward foray to the burgeoning Yiddish cultural center of Buenos Aires), the dissolution of the Vilna Troupe’s formal infrastructure in 1935 inspired Jacob Waislitz and his family to seek out audiences in more remote locales. And so, while their colleagues struggled

to resurrect the Vilna Troupe in New York or tried unsuccessfully to relive the Vilna Troupe's "triumph march" across Western Europe, Waislitz's *Vilner* family made the Southern Hemisphere its new home. In doing so, the Waislitzes brought new sectors of the global Jewish community into conversation with a European-born and North American-centered Yiddish art theater movement that had rarely crossed the Equator. While the career trajectories of these actors were atypical in their extreme mobility, a close examination of the post-Vilna Troupe careers of the Waislitz family offers a poignant demonstration of how the Vilna Troupe continued to exert a transnational presence even – and perhaps even especially – after the company's official 1935 demise.

Born Avrom-Yankev Vayslits in a provincial Polish *shtetl* around the turn of the century, the young man who would become known as Jacob Waislitz was among the thousands of Jewish intellectuals who attended Y. L. Peretz's Yiddish theater symposium at the Warsaw Philharmonia in January of 1910. At the time, Waislitz was just 19 years old; an impressionable young man who had just finished his secondary schooling and was unsure of his next step. Peretz, Nomberg, Vayter, and Mukdoyni's impassioned speeches calling for the creation of a "better" Yiddish theater to secure the future of Jewish culture had a profound impact on Waislitz, who immediately decided that he would "dedicate his life to the Yiddish stage" from that moment onward.⁶³³ When Peretz founded a short-lived Yiddish drama academy in collaboration with future Vilna Troupe director Dovid Herman, Waislitz was one of the first to join and quickly became close with the directing teacher who would continue to mentor him over the course of his career. After two years of study under Herman, Waislitz graduated the school just one month after the death of Peretz, whose campaign had inspired Waislitz and countless others of his generation to pursue careers in the Yiddish theater. Unbeknownst to Waislitz and his

⁶³³ Arnold Zable, *Wanderers and Dreamers: Tales of the David Herman Theater* (Melbourne: Hyland, 1998), 14.

classmates in Warsaw at the time, their graduation also coincided with the first stirrings of the Vilna Troupe. The formal beginning of Jacob Waislitz's theater career thus marked the passing of the baton from the failed first generation of Yiddish theater reformers (Peretz, Vayter, Nomberg, Dinezon, and their disciple Dovid Herman) to the next generation who would build the Yiddish art theater movement.

In 1915, there was still not a single professional Yiddish theater company in Warsaw that was deemed respectable by Jewish intellectuals. For a student of Peretz or Herman to join a *shund* theater was unthinkable, since such a move would have been perceived as a public rejection of the entire art theater ideology in which they had been trained. Waislitz and his peers thus found themselves in professional limbo upon graduation: after years of schooling, they dreamed of becoming Yiddish actors, but there was no way to do so without horrifying their mentors. The students of the drama school had been trained for a career that did not yet exist. Instead, Waislitz joined an amateur Yiddish drama club, where he enjoyed moderate success, and took on a series of day jobs to pay his bills. Had the war not intervened, he might have remained an amateur actor in Warsaw forever. Like so many of the Vilna Troupe actors, Waislitz's pathway to becoming a professional Yiddish actor was an unforeseen historical accident enabled by the chaos that the First World War enacted upon Eastern European Jewry.

The war brought an end to Waislitz's ability to make a living working odd jobs in Warsaw, and so with few options at his disposal, the young actor set out on the road performing one-man shows and staged readings across Eastern Europe. It was while traveling in 1916 that Waislitz first learned of the Vilna Troupe.⁶³⁴ Little is known about Waislitz's activities during this period, but it is certainly not inconceivable to imagine that rumors of a "better Yiddish theater" could have brought the itinerant young actor to Vilna, where he might have ventured

⁶³⁴ Zable, 14.

over to the Circus Theater to see for himself what these newcomers were producing. Or perhaps he first encountered the company during their 1917 tour of the Polish countryside, competing against them for the attention of Jewish theatergoers in a small town or village. As a wandering performer who spent his time almost exclusively on the road during the years of the Vilna Troupe's emergence, Waislitz was uniquely positioned to witness the rapid growth of the company's reputation firsthand.

We might imagine that perhaps Waislitz even tried to join the Vilna Troupe around the time of its founding and was rebuffed; early on, it was extremely unusual for the company to take on new members. But when Azro and Alomis founded their own rival Vilna Troupe in 1919 and took nearly half of the original company's members with them, those who stayed behind under Mazo's leadership had no other choice but to quickly recruit new members to replace their departed colleagues. Jacob Waislitz was one of the few actors invited to join, along with his actress-wife Yokheved (nee Provizor). At 28 and 30, respectively, Jacob and Yokheved Waislitz were nearly a decade older than most of their new colleagues when they joined the Vilna Troupe, and they were among the few who were married. When Yokheved became pregnant with their first child shortly thereafter, the Waislitzes became the first Vilna Troupe members to bear and raise children within the company. For the adult members of the Vilna Troupe, the work and travel schedule was grueling; David Waislitz recalled that in a typical week, his parents might have rehearsed one play each the morning and another each afternoon, while performing in a different show every night.⁶³⁵ For the children, however, it was a kind of paradise. Mila and David Waislitz would play hide and seek in the train cars that carried the costumes, sets, and props from one town to the next, and watch from backstage as their parents rehearsed and

⁶³⁵ Zable, 15.

performed.⁶³⁶ The members of the Vilna Troupe formed their extended family; while the stage and the train were their home, their school, and their playground.

The Waislitzes were also unusual among Vilna Troupe members in another way: they were among the few *Vilner* who remained loyal to a single branch. For sixteen years, between 1919 and 1935, Jacob, Yokheved, Mila, and David Waislitz traveled exclusively with Mazo's branch of the Vilna Troupe across Eastern and Western Europe. Other actors came and went, but Jacob Waislitz and his family stayed with Mazo's company. The only other members of a Vilna Troupe company to remain with a single branch for more than a few years were Mazo himself and his lover, Miriam Orleska. As Jacob and Yokheved's children grew up, they followed their parents' lead in entering the company and building their lives within it. When 18-year-old Mila fell in love with a fellow actor who was temporarily performing with the Vilna Troupe in the early 1930's, she convinced him to marry her and stay.⁶³⁷ The Waislitzes continued to remain with Mazo's Vilna Troupe until the very last curtain call of the company's final performance on September 16, 1935.

Still, the Waislitzes' unusually strong loyalty to Mazo's Vilna Troupe did not stop Jacob from continuing to perform on his own. Every summer during the Troupe's off-season, Jacob would leave his wife and children behind in Vilna and set out on his own for a few months. On makeshift stages in taverns, lecture halls, restaurants, synagogues, barns, and private homes across Poland, Jacob would give solo performances of material drawn from the Vilna Troupe's repertoire in which he played all of the parts himself (of the fifteen plays he listed as his

⁶³⁶ Zable, 15. As David Waislitz later recalled, he and his sister would try on costumes and put on their own plays backstage while their parents rehearsed.

⁶³⁷ Mila's husband, Moyshe Potashinski, had performed variously with a variety of Yiddish theater companies (including Ida Kaminska's ensemble, Azazel, Ararat, the Cracow Yiddish Art Theater) as well as a brief earlier stint in Mazo's Vilna Troupe before rejoining the company and marrying Mila in 1932. Ibid, 25.

“recitation repertoire,” thirteen had famously been staged by the Vilna Troupe, including *The Dybbuk*, *Carcass*, *Shylock*, *Day and Night*, *Kidush Hashem*, and *Singer of His Sorrow*).⁶³⁸ These off-season performances by itinerant Troupe-affiliated actors like Waislitz were yet another means by which the Vilna Troupe brand gained transnational currency in the 1920’s and 30’s. Waislitz, like most of his colleagues, frequently advertised his individual recitals as being under the auspices of “the Vilna Troupe,” employing the company’s famous logo at every opportunity. Thus just as the Vilna Troupe phenomenon encompassed an ever-shifting network of independent theater companies, it also encompassed the performances of individual actors who emphasized their *Vilner* credentials as a publicity maneuver. To Jewish theatergoers between the two World Wars, “the Vilna Troupe” was a catchall that included all of the above.

The collapse of the Vilna Troupe infrastructure was by no means the end of the Vilna Troupe for the Waislitzes. The formal structure of the company’s branches may have vanished, but *their* “Vilna Troupe” was just as alive as ever. After the last performance of Mazo’s Vilna Troupe in 1935, Jacob Waislitz developed a thriving career as a professional Vilna Troupe performer. Traveling the old Vilna Troupe tour circuits and beyond, he was able to make a steady living by presenting the same solo recitals and readings that he had originally developed for the off-seasons. In a way, the dissolution of Mazo’s company brought Waislitz newfound freedom; without having to plan his tours around the Vilna Troupe schedule, he could travel anywhere that suited him so long as he could find an audience for Yiddish theater. In the two years immediately following the dissolution of Mazo’s Vilna Troupe, Jacob Waislitz performed

⁶³⁸ Recitation repertoire, Jacob Weislitz Collection (RG 633), Box 1, Folder 3, YIVO.

the Vilna Troupe repertoire as a solo artist in Poland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Sweden, South Africa, Rhodesia, Canada, Brazil, and Australia.⁶³⁹

Meanwhile, Jacob's daughter Mila and son-in-law Moyshe followed his lead and took their own two-actor revue across Poland, France, Belgium, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Belgium, while Yokheved and David stopped performing temporarily and returned to Vilna. In addition to these independent performances, Waislitz and his daughter each created a new theater company of their own that was directly modeled upon the Vilna Troupe. In Melbourne, Jacob Waislitz united the best talents of the Australian Yiddish theater scene in the Kadimah Art Theatre, which he would later rename the Dovid Herman Theatre after the famous Vilna Troupe director and mentor who had first taught Waislitz how to act. When Waislitz's new Australian company presented *The Dybbuk*, the director reminded spectators that the play was being presented "according to the Vilna Troupe tradition."⁶⁴⁰ At the same time, Mila and Moyshe founded their own Vilna Troupe-inspired company in Brussels, the short-lived Yiddish Folks Theater. Though neither of these companies ever formally employed the Vilna Troupe name, both adopted virtually the same repertoire, rehearsal methods, organizational structure, and aesthetic that Yiddish theatergoers had come to expect from the *Vilner*. Jacob and Mila Waislitz demanded the same from their actors as Mazo and Herman had once required of them: a standard Yiddish dialect, a rigorous daily rehearsal process in which new material was constantly in preparation, the abolishment of the prompter, a conscious rejection of melodramatic impulses and gestures, an insistence that the actors learn a "proper" literary Yiddish, and so on. The Dovid

⁶³⁹ Waislitz maintained careful records of all of his performances between 1928 and 1964, including the city, date, repertoire, and number of attendees, in a series of personal diaries preserved in the YIVO archives. Jacob Weislitz Papers (RG 633), Box 1, Folders 1-2, YIVO.

⁶⁴⁰ Linda Phillips, "The Dybuk as Seen Through Australian Eyes: Its Unique Aspects." *Australian Jewish Herald*. Jacob Weislitz Papers (RG 633), Box 1, Folder 3, YIVO.

Herman Theatre and the Yiddish Folks Theater, like so many Yiddish theater companies of the interwar period, were thus essentially new branches of the Vilna Troupe. These organizations were just as much a part of the Vilna Troupe phenomenon as any company that had ever officially operated under the name. In this way, the Vilna Troupe brand continued to exert a strong presence on the Yiddish theater for decades after its formal dissolution.

Jacob, Yokheved, and Mila Waislitz continued to tour internationally right up until the Nazi invasion of Poland. When the war broke out, the members of the Waislitz family – like so many *Vilner* – found themselves stranded along the theatrical tour circuits that had been their home for decades. Stuck in Melbourne, Jacob Waislitz was the luckiest of the clan. Together with another former Vilna Troupe colleague, Rokhl Holtzer, who was also stranded mid-tour in Australia during the war years, Waislitz worked tirelessly to build the Dovid Herman Theatre into a thriving professional company. Meanwhile, his wife and son found themselves marooned in Vilna with the German army fast approaching. In a daring attempt to reunite her family, Yokheved Waislitz smuggled herself and her son to Moscow, where they boarded the Trans-Siberian Railroad and eventually made their way to Australia via Kobe, Japan.⁶⁴¹ Their daughter Mila and son-in-law Moyshe, on the other hand, would not escape Nazi Europe unscathed. Mila and Moyshe continued performing in Brussels with the Yiddish Folks Theater right up until the Nazi invasion of Belgium in May of 1940, at which point they went into hiding together with the other actors. Three years later, Mila and Moyshe were sent to Auschwitz after a neighbor betrayed them. There both actors were immediately recognized by the Jewish inmates as members of the prestigious Vilna Troupe. At the request of their blockmates, the two *Vilner* continued to perform solo renditions of material from the Vilna Troupe repertoire in secret

⁶⁴¹ Zable, 25.

throughout their internments. Mila and Moyshe both managed to survive and reunite with their family in Melbourne after the war.

Just as they had all performed together with the Vilna Troupe in the 1920's and 30's, the members of the Waislitz family continued to act together in the 1950's, 60's, and 70's under the auspices of the Dovid Herman Theatre. With Melbourne as their new home base, the Waislitzes continued to travel constantly over the course of the next few decades, keeping the Vilna Troupe's style and repertoire alive as they toured across Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, the United States, Brazil, Argentina, and Israel. Under their influence, Melbourne became a major center of Yiddish theatrical activity in the immediate postwar period, attracting dozens of prominent Yiddish performers to come to Australia as guest artists with the Dovid Herman Theatre. More often than not, these visiting guest artists were also former Vilna Troupe members like Zygmunt Turkow and Jacob Rotbaum. Others, like Ida Kaminska, Shmuel Dzigan, and Yisroel Shumacher, knew the Waislitzes before the war from their professional connections to other *Vilner* colleagues. Decades after its demise, then, the Vilna Troupe remained instrumental in establishing Melbourne as a major postwar center of Yiddish theater. It was the Vilna Troupe's network of affiliated performers, most of whom maintained close contact with one another long after the company's collapse, which enabled the Dovid Herman Theatre to build its international reputation.

Tracing the career trajectories of Jacob Waislitz and the members of his family reveals how the Vilna Troupe – as an artistic network and as a guiding ideology for Yiddish stage practice – remained active long after last vestiges of the company had supposedly disappeared. Encompassing both the collective activities of multiple companies *and* the careers of hundreds of independent theater artists who identified themselves as *Vilner*, the Vilna Troupe did not end in

1935 with the dissolution of Mazo's Vilna Troupe, or with Hitler's annihilation of Eastern European Jewry, or with postwar linguistic assimilation in America. Only with the death of its last surviving member did the Vilna Troupe finally vanish as a living theater tradition, leaving behind a legacy of echoes that can still be felt today in the work of the countless actors, designers, and theater artists who fell under its spell.⁶⁴²

⁶⁴² The last surviving member of the Vilna Troupe, Luba Kadison Buloff, died on May 4, 1999. See Caraid O'Brien, "Luba Kadison Buloff, 99, Last Survivor of Yiddish Theater Company," *Jewish Daily Forward*, 12 May 2006, available online at <http://forward.com/articles/1388/luba-kadison-buloff--last-survivor-of-yiddish-th/> (accessed March 1, 2013) and Dennis Hevesi, "Luba Kadison, 99, an Actress in Yiddish Theater's Heyday," *The New York Times* 9 May 2006, B7.

Epilogue: Staging Jewish Modernism

This dissertation was never supposed to be about the Vilna Troupe. Rather, much like the Vilna Troupe actors in *The Dybbuk* who discovered that they had become modernist insurrectionists almost by accident, I began writing a history of the Vilna Troupe without hardly even realizing it at first.

My original intent was to pen a transnationally-inflected study of the Yiddish art theater movement that demonstrated how cross-continental correspondence shaped the artistic aims of avant-garde Yiddish theaters in two locales: Warsaw and New York. The Vilna Troupe was initially supposed to be the prelude to a story set in the late 1920's and early 1930's that would focus on personal and professional correspondence between companies like Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater, the Jewish Art Theatre, the Yiddish section of the Federal Theatre Project, the Warsaw Yiddish Art Theater, VNIT (Varshever nayer yidisher teater), Yung Teater, Azazel, and others. It was these companies, I initially felt, that best represented the Yiddish art theater movement's record of avant-garde creativity. Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater was the first to introduce American audiences to Chekhov and for quite some time, had the only revolving stage in New York; the Warsaw Yiddish Art Theater was especially inventive in staging massive crowd scenes and collaborated closely with leading Polish avant-garde artists of the period; while Yung Teater was responsible for bringing blackbox theater and "simultaneous staging" to Poland. In order to understand how modernism developed on the Yiddish stage, I thought, I would need to reconstruct the relationship between these companies. The Vilna Troupe, in

comparison, seemed hardly modernist at all – at least, not in the self-conscious way of so many other Yiddish theater companies of the period. The Vilna Troupe’s work seemed merely a precursor to the full incorporation of modernism onto the Yiddish stage.

But the *Vilner* crept into my notes unbidden, until their presence became so dominant that I could no longer ignore them. For in the Yiddish art theater movement, as I began to discover, all roads led back to the Vilna Troupe. The chapter I wanted to write about the visionary directors Mikhl Weichert and Clara Segalovitch? Both began their careers as *Vilner*. The Warsaw Yiddish Art Theater, the Chicago Dramatishe Gezelshaft, Yung Teater, VNIT, and Ararat? All founded by artists whose credentials derived from their Vilna Troupe association. As I began to trace the activities of these artists and companies, it quickly became clear that *Vilner* affiliation was the single common denominator that connected virtually every significant figure in the Yiddish theatrical avant-garde.

And yet, the Vilna Troupe itself remained a mystery. My research for what I initially thought would be a brief sub-section of the first chapter hit one dead end after another. I could not come up with satisfying answers to even my most basic questions about the company, and each question only led to the next. What was the Vilna Troupe? Each individual artist and Yiddish theater historian seemed to have a different answer that told me more about their own interpersonal relationships with other actors than the contours of the company as a whole. What was the relationship between the “*Vilner aktyorn*” (“those actors from Vilna”) and the city known for its vibrant Jewish literary culture? In fact, the connection was bizarrely tangential. Where did the Vilna Troupe perform? Why, everywhere, it seemed. How many Vilna Troupes were there? Depends on whom you ask and how you define a “Vilna Troupe.” Why did the Vilna Troupe become famous and why were non-Jewish spectators so fascinated by its productions?

The actors seemed just as mystified about this as I was. In classic Jewish fashion, I found myself answering each question with another. Who was a member of the Vilna Troupe? Well, who among major Yiddish actors *wasn't* a member of the Vilna Troupe during the interwar period? Who was their audience? The more interesting questions was: who wasn't? Why did the last Vilna Troupe collapse in 1935? But *did* the Vilna Troupe actually end in 1935? The more I learned about the Vilna Troupe, the more riddles I encountered.

In seeking to understand the Vilna Troupe as a discrete theater company, I was asking all of the wrong questions. It was only when I began to conceive of the Vilna Troupe as a kind of broad-based artistic movement that it started to come into focus. Gradually, I realized that perhaps the best way to realize the goals of my original project – a transatlantic study of the emergence of Yiddish theatrical modernism – was through the prism of the Vilna Troupe. For it was the *Vilner* who first introduced modernism to the Jewish stage, and it was they who inspired and led a transnational Yiddish art theater movement.

Most mysteriously of all, I could not find a history of the Vilna Troupe that took into account the activities of the multiple *Vilner* companies. The definitive study of the Vilna Troupe that I was looking for simply did not exist. During the actors' lifetimes, historians of Jewish theater were well aware that writing about the Vilna Troupe was a risky business. Like the famous joke about a lone Jew stranded on a desert island who builds two synagogues ("the *shul* I go to, and the one I would never set foot in") just so that he can reject one of them, one of the most salient characteristics of the Vilna Troupe was the staunch refusal of its members to ever acknowledge the existence of other *Vilner* companies.⁶⁴³ Likewise, spectators, critics, and the

⁶⁴³ A strikingly similar joke is also a classic of the Welsh comedic repertoire. On the distinction between the Jewish and Welsh versions, see Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say About the Jews* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 19-20. In both cases, Telushkin writes, the joke "depends on the fact that Judaism and

few historians who wrote about the *Vilner* tended to ally themselves with one Vilna Troupe against all of the others. A comprehensive history that defined the Vilna Troupe as an artistic and ideological movement rather than a particular group of artists would have been an explicit rejection of the way that the actors sought to portray their company.

But seven years after the death of the last *Vilner*, over seventy years after the dissolution of the last Vilna Troupe, and nearly one hundred years after FADA's founding, the old quarrels about *Vilner* authenticity are less relevant. Besides, above all, the actors wanted their Vilna Troupe to be remembered. They inscribed odes to the company on their gravestones: "*Vilner trupe! Mayn sheyner kholem*" ["Vilna Troupe! My beautiful dream"] reads Alexander Azro's, while his wife Sonia Alomis asked her children to ensure that "Beloved Star of the Vilna Troupe" would appear as her epitaph.⁶⁴⁴ They left handwritten instructions addressed to "future historians" in their personal archives.⁶⁴⁵ They carefully preserved every program, review, letter, and photograph that had to do with their company in meticulously organized scrapbooks. More than one Vilna Troupe affiliate kept detailed records of tour schedules, repertoire, ticket sales, production expenses, and actor dividends for all of their performances over the course of decades. Others painstakingly copied personal correspondence by hand to preserve it for future Vilna Troupe historians. Joseph Buloff and Luba Kadison's archive at Harvard University even includes their makeup kits and cigarette lighters.⁶⁴⁶ The *Vilner* firmly believed that the theater company they had created had profound historical significance. And they were not wrong.

Welsh nonconformist Protestantism are religions in which the community is not under the control of one universally acknowledged religious leader, such as a pope." (20)

⁶⁴⁴ Sharon Asro and Alexander Zaloum, interview by author. Cambridge, MA. March 3, 2013.

⁶⁴⁵ See pp. 330-331 of this dissertation.

⁶⁴⁶ Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Artifacts Collection 1, Harvard Judaica Division.

Historical vindication was not the only goal of the *Vilner* towards the end of their lives. Many never stopped trying to build the Yiddish art theater movement. Long after audiences and critics had turned their attention elsewhere, the *Vilner* were still fighting for a “better” Yiddish theater. They never gave up. Maurice Schwartz spent the last year of his life working to create a Yiddish art theater in Israel.⁶⁴⁷ In 1963, Joseph Buloff and playwright/screenwriter Irv Bauer tried to get a new Jewish art theater off the ground in New York; their proposal to potential funders included a list of plays of which nearly half were drawn directly from the *Vilner* repertoire.⁶⁴⁸ They did not secure enough funding and the venture failed. Still, Buloff continued to espouse his vision of a revitalized Yiddish art theater movement to anyone who would listen. As late as 1980, Buloff insisted to actor and director Jack Garfein that the *culture* of the Yiddish art theater “shouldn’t get lost”:

BULOFF: If it’s possible, if there are the people who have the energy and dedicate themselves to it – let me tell you something, it could bring about a tremendous response.
 GARFEIN: And it should be a Yiddish art theater.
 BULOFF: Yes, not the cheap –
 GARFEIN: Inspired by by the Vilna Troupe.
 BULOFF: Yes. Not anything else. On this basis. And if we are presenting a play, maybe a little bit more advanced, as the theater is now. But basically, *on that principle*. On that principle. It doesn’t have to be, you know, 68 theaters. But America deserves to have at least one or two. And that should be enough.⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁷ Lifson, 743. Schwartz was, of course, no *Vilner* but his career was a product of the Vilna Troupe’s “art theater” ideology.

⁶⁴⁸ “We believe that there is a need for a special JEWISH THEATRE CENTER in New York City,” wrote Buloff and Bauer, “[...] This project must justify its existence by its ultimate commercial success, but it is by no means a purely commercial venture. It must be approached and considered as an effort to create an artistic dramatic atmosphere with emphasis on JEWISH IDENTITY.” Interestingly, in a departure from standard Yiddish art theater practice, Buloff and Bauer proposed that this new company would not perform on the Sabbath and would hold its Saturday night shows only after sundown in accordance with Jewish law. Joseph Buloff and Irv Bauer, “Project for a Jewish Theater Center in New York City,” September 1963. Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Papers Collection 1, Folder BG 4, Harvard Judaica Division.

⁶⁴⁹ Joseph Buloff, int. by Jack Garfein, 1980.

The Vilna Troupe may not have been perfect and its methods could perhaps use some updating, Buloff admitted. But a new Yiddish art theater modeled upon the Vilna Troupe was still his goal. To Buloff, a “Yiddish art theater” was any company that followed the artistic ideology established by the Vilna Troupe. It was a matter of “principle,” a question of what an artist believed. The Vilna Troupe was, as was so often invoked by its critics and fans, a kind of near-religion.

It has often been said that modern Yiddish theater replaced the synagogue as a new secular center for Jewish moral instruction and communal life, particularly in America.⁶⁵⁰ The poet Moyshe Leyb Halpern once described the Yiddish theater with this parable:

There once was a vulgarian who went to the synagogue on one corner of the street when he wanted to weep, and to a bawdyhouse on the other corner when he wanted to make merry. But once, when he wanted both to weep and make merry at the same time, he put up a theater in the middle of the street that combined synagogue and bawdyhouse into one.⁶⁵¹

Halpern’s allegory, tongue-in-cheek though it may be, is in fact a rather accurate description of Yiddish theater in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But the artists of the Yiddish art theater movement went one step further than their predecessors. What they sought was not merely to create a theater/synagogue, but rather, a full-bodied secular religion that worshipped at the altar of “high art.” This notion of theater as a mode of spiritual practice, in turn, drew upon the historically rich relationship between theatricality and Jewish religious life. Prior to the comparatively late emergence of professional Jewish theater in the nineteenth century, strict rabbinic prohibitions against performance ironically made the synagogue the theatrical center of Jewish life. As Jeffrey Veidlinger and others have pointed out, it is no accident that the Yiddish

⁶⁵⁰ See, for example, Sandrow, 77.

⁶⁵¹ Amended from Irving Howe’s translation in *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the Eastern European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*, 30th anniversary edition (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 483.

words for stage (בינע “*bine*”) and the synagogue platform from which the Torah is chanted (בימה “*bimah*”) are orthographic neighbors and almost homophones.⁶⁵² Indeed, it was not uncommon for Eastern European Jews to use the two terms interchangeably – for example, *Di bime* (“the stage/pulpit”) was the name of a short-lived Yiddish theater journal published in Vilna in the mid-1920’s.⁶⁵³ The close semantic relationship between the language of the theater and the language of the synagogue became codified with the establishment of modern Hebrew, in which *bimah* (בימה) is a polyseme that means both “synagogue lecture” and “stage.”⁶⁵⁴ It was no major leap, then, for the Vilna Troupe to insist that the Yiddish art theater could be a secular “Temple” for modern Jewry. This aspect of the *Vilner* ideology was simply the byproduct of a Jewish theatricality that was deeply interwoven with religious practice and spiritual life.

Of course, not every Vilna Troupe production met the same high artistic standard. Some of its most successful productions were decidedly lowbrow. *Dorfsyung*, for example, was in the eyes of one critic “half *shund* and the other half not much better” and yet “with it, as with everything that they presented in the beginning [*in zeyer breyshis*], the *Vilner* ignited a furor.”⁶⁵⁵ What differentiated the Vilna Troupe from other Yiddish theater companies of the period was not so much *what* the actors actually presented in their productions. Rather, it was the *way* that these artists approach theater-making that caused them to stand apart. For the *Vilner* envisioned theater as a kind of *spiritual calling*. Journalists loved to describe how every Vilna Troupe production

⁶⁵² See Veidlinger, *Jewish Public Culture*, 165. In 2003, the University of Maryland Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Studies hosted a conference on a similar theme, entitled “The Bimah and the Bine: Spirituality, Performance, and the Jewish Stage,” organized by Dr. Miriam Isaacs.

⁶⁵³ *Di bime* published a total of 15 issues between December 1924 and April 1925 before folding.

⁶⁵⁴ The use of “*bimah*” as a synonym for “stage” was cemented by the rise of the Hebrew-language theater company Habimah (“the stage”), founded in Moscow in 1918. See Yitskhok Norman, *Bereshit Habimah: Nakhum Tsemakh meyased Habimah bekhazon uvema’as* (Jerusalem: Hasifriyah hatsionit, 1966), esp. pp. 182-183 and Emanuel Levy, *The Habimah: Israel’s National Theater* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

⁶⁵⁵ Katznelson, “Der koyekh fun di Vilner,” 16.

occasioned “elaborate ritual preparations, like the *Kohanim* [High Priests in the ancient Temple] preparing for their holy work.”⁶⁵⁶ In the estimation of another contemporary, it was this quasi-religious intent that distinguished the *Vilner* from all other Yiddish actors:

In the Vilna Troupe, a tremendous reverence [*yiras hakoved*] for theater work prevailed. For them, theater frequently took on the character of religious service [*avoyde*]. This approach elicited tremendous reverence [*yiras hakoved*] among audiences for their work. Their productions were sleek and refined. And this was crucial in creating the proper atmosphere around theater.⁶⁵⁷

The *Vilner* treated theater making as secular holy work with national implications. For them, high quality theater was a critical step in the development of a fully-fledged modern Jewish culture, which would, in turn, legitimize Jews in the eyes of other nations. Jewish intellectuals had long sought precisely this sort of public acceptance, but the genius of the Vilna Troupe was that it successfully dramatized the struggle for Jewish cultural legitimacy in a public forum. Why was theater so important to Yiddish cultural activists of the interwar period? Because, as Vilna Troupe director Dovid Herman later reflected, the stage provided one of the few sites where Jews could *perform* their nationhood exactly as they saw fit, before a global jury of artistic peers:

If theater is for all other peoples one of the most important national-cultural factors, it is for us, in our situation, *the most important* factor. A whole complete system of visible and invisible factors influence other peoples. The characteristics specific to that nation are expressed everywhere, even in the streets, not to mention museums, schools, theaters, and so on. [...] But we Jews live everywhere among foreign communities that influence us every day, every minute, consciously and subconsciously. And therefore, the theater question *must* be a matter of the utmost concern for us. Our theater ought to be a kind of smithy, where Jewish individuality can come into being. The better Yiddish theater ought to become for the modern Jewish community *that which the synagogue was for the pious Jew in the past*, its place of rest and refuge.⁶⁵⁸

⁶⁵⁶ Katznelson, “Der koyekh fun di Vilner,” 16.

⁶⁵⁷ Turkow-Grudberg, *Yidish teater in Poyln*, 46.

⁶⁵⁸ Nakhman Mayzel, “Dovid Herman,” *Literarische bleter*, 21 May 1937, 330. My emphasis.

Without other types of public institutions at their disposal, it was only via the public-facing theatrical stage that Jews could acquire cultural legitimacy from the outside world.

The Yiddish art theater, then, was not simply a campaign for the reformation of Jewish theater. Rather, we can read this movement as a representation of the cultural, intellectual, and national aspirations of Eastern European Jewry between the two World Wars. The central question at the heart of the Yiddish art theater movement was the same question that haunted modern Jewish culture at large during this period: What ought to be the place of the Jew in the modern world? The Vilna Troupe offered a compelling answer to this dilemma. It is possible to fuse together the past with the future, the religious with the secular, the authentically Jewish with the lure of European culture, folk traditions with high art ideals, the *Vilner* told their audiences. A Jew can be a citizen of the world *and* an advocate for Jewish national culture. In the “world theater” of the Vilna Troupe, a spectator could be both Jewish *and* modern at the same time. This was the promise of the Yiddish art theater stage, and the product of the Vilna Troupe’s modernist cultural revolution.

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